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M. T. COFFIN

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EAN
9 780380 789276 50399
ISBN 0-380-78927-2

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#24

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M. T. COFFIN

AN AVON CAMELOT BOOK

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AVON BOOKS
A division of
The Hearst Corporation
1350 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10019

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Published by arrangement with the author
Visit our website at **http://AvonBooks.com**
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-92891
ISBN: 0-380-78927-2
RL: 4.9

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First Avon Camelot Printing: August 1997

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"See you tomorrow," Kevin called. "I'll cross my fingers for both of us."

Michael Dalton nodded and waved as he started down the sidewalk. It had been a perfect, hot June day for the tryouts. Kevin was his best friend. If they both made the summer swim team, it'd be great. And Kevin seemed to think it could happen. Michael was pretty sure it wouldn't.

Michael dreaded going home. His older brother, Jeremy, was going to question him about the tryouts for the swim team. Michael pushed his still-wet hair out of his eyes and walked slower.

He was pretty sure he hadn't made it. Mr. Hardy hadn't announced the times, but maybe he'd done better than he thought. Maybe he would be picked for the community center summer swim team after all. He would know tomorrow after school. They were going to post lists of the kids who'd made it.

Michael sighed and scuffed his sneaker on the sidewalk. Get real, he told himself. It would take

a miracle. He had felt as slow as a barge during his timed laps. The coaches were all volunteer parents except for Mr. Hardy. He was the head coach—and he was the real swim team coach for the high school.

Coach Hardy was a professional. His face never showed anything unless he wanted it to. And the parents were all so careful not to react in any way that might give away what they were thinking. But it had seemed to Michael that they had all been trying too hard to smile at him, trying not to make him feel bad. And he had seen Coach Hardy frowning as he turned away from the pool, he was pretty sure.

Michael kicked at a pebble. Kevin would probably make it. And Andy and Tim and the rest of the really fast swimmers. Michael kicked another little rock and watched it spin down the sidewalk. He had really wanted to impress Coach Hardy, too. All the kids did. That was part of the reason anyone went out for the community center summer teams. Michael's brother, Jeremy, had started out on the summer team, and now he was on the junior high team, traveling to other schools for swim meets.

Michael knew Coach Hardy had probably been disappointed in him. Teachers and coaches always hoped he would be as good as his older brother, Jeremy. And he never was. Jeremy could do everything better, and the worst part was, he was always pointing it out. He was so competitive that he ruined everything. Even going to the

beach with Jeremy was hard. He could turn anything into a contest. And he always won.

On an impulse, Michael decided to take the long way home, up Foster Street. When he was little, he had refused to walk up Foster unless Jeremy was with him—because of the Creepy House. The Creepy House was an old, broken-down, colonial-style mansion at the end of the block. The little kids had all thought it was haunted, that the old woman who lived there was a witch. Now, of course, Michael knew better. The old woman was just unfriendly and probably had problems of her own which made her that way. But back in first and second grade, he had been terrified of her. Jeremy had teased him about it, too. Jeremy was almost never afraid of anything.

Michael looked down the sidewalk and hesitated, staring in surprise. The old woman at the Creepy House was having a garage sale. There were tables of junk spread across the driveway. Michael slowed his step even more, glad to have an extra excuse to dawdle.

Once he was home, Michael knew he would have to tell Jeremy that he was pretty sure he had blown the tryouts. Then he would have to tell his parents. After his parents had said all the nice things that parents say when you try hard and fail at something anyway, Jeremy would start in. First it would sound like a pep talk. Then it would turn into bragging about how much better he was at swimming than Michael.

To top it all off, Jeremy would want to have a breath-holding contest in their pool.

Michael walked a little slower still. Jeremy always said that if Michael could beat him in a breath-holding contest, he would never say another word about being better at things. But he only said it because he knew that Michael never would.

Once or twice a year, Michael let his brother talk him into it. They would go out to the pool in the backyard and slide into the water together, take four huge breaths, then go under water and sit facing each other in the shallow end. Jeremy would make faces, or pretend to be drowning, or whatever it took to break Michael's concentration. But the truth was, he would win anyway and Michael knew it. His brother was a great swimmer, and had incredibly strong lungs from having swum so much all of his life.

Michael stopped in front of the Creepy House and looked across the lawn. Kids still talked about this place. One of the windows was broken and a piece of cardboard was taped over it. Paint was peeling like long strings of paper from the porch railing. No one was outside. Not even the old woman who still scared little school kids with her wild eyes and her mop of silver-white hair.

Michael tried to recall when he had last seen her. It had been a long time. This year, he hadn't walked this way more than a couple of times since school started. And now there were only about three weeks left.

Michael stood on the sidewalk, scanning the

stuff on the lawn. There were sawhorses with sheets of plywood laid on top of them and old brown card tables, all loaded with the usual garage sale junk. Nothing too interesting. There were can openers and eggbeaters and wooden spoons. Michael noticed a dead microwave, with a crack down the door. He had two dollars in his pocket, but he couldn't see anything at all that he would want to buy. He was about to go when he noticed a table on the other side of the lawn, stacked with boxes. Stuff that hadn't been put out yet?

Michael glanced back toward the old house. Where was she? It would be interesting after all this time to get a close look at the Creepy House Witch, maybe even talk to her a little. He would be able to tell Jeff and Kevin about it. They had cruised Foster Street with him during the summer after second grade, all hoping to catch a glimpse of the spooky old woman. Then they'd pedal their bikes away fast, giggling and scaring each other by making up stuff all the way home. Poor old lady. He hoped she had never noticed them, or if she had, that she had just thought they were silly kids playing some game.

Michael stood still a few more seconds, then made a sudden decision. He was in no hurry to get home and face Jeremy's questions. He turned off the sidewalk and crossed the lawn, glancing up at the house every few seconds. His heart was beating a little faster than it needed to and he almost laughed out loud. He was still a little

scared of the Creepy House Witch, he admitted to himself, smiling.

"Can I help you?"

The voice, cracked and ragged, came from *behind* Michael. He turned back toward the sidewalk, his heart racing now. There she was. He swallowed and tried to talk sense into himself. She was a perfectly normal white-haired woman who just didn't have the time or the money to keep her house up. That was all. To be afraid of her was absolutely idiotic.

"I asked if you needed help," the old woman said. "It would be polite of you to answer." She was frowning.

Michael shook his head, taking a step back to hide his nervousness. Her hair was cottony and wild and her eyes were odd somehow, but, he kept telling himself, she was not a witch. No one was a witch. She was looking at him very closely.

"I had been hoping you would come by one day," she began, then sighed, looking at him closely, her head tilted. Michael nodded as though he understood and took one more step away.

"You like games, don't you? I seem to remember that you and your friends like games."

Michael had no idea what to say. Did she remember him? How could she? Lots of kids had gone past her house, scared and curious. He had never spoken to her.

"You do like games?" She sounded annoyed now, and she cleared her throat. Michael nodded cautiously, still easing away from her, but she

kept moving *toward him,* so the distance between them didn't really widen. She was still scrutinizing his face.

"Oh, yes," she said slowly. "I am sure of it. You love games. Most boys like to pretend they are in danger, make believe danger is fun, I suppose. Well, look through the boxes up there." She gestured. "There's one I thought you might like."

Michael glanced at the still-closed cartons he had noticed earlier. He backed up one more step, then turned and strode across the lawn. He would just take a quick look to be polite, then he would go. If there was something cheap he could buy, he would, just to make himself feel a little less guilty for riding past on his bike all those times, for peering up at her windows and acting like he was being chased as he pedaled off. At the time, he had never thought about what it must have been like for her to have so many kids curious about her.

Michael looked back at the old woman. She still looked angry. He walked a little faster, uncomfortably aware that she was watching him as he stopped and looked down into the boxes. They were empty. Puzzled, Michael looked up again, then back down into the boxes.

"It's there," the old woman called. "It's there." She pointed at the largest carton.

Michael looked again. This time he noticed a flat, leather case lying on the bottom of the biggest box. He reached down and pulled it out. It was dusty and stained. "Is this what you wanted

me to see?" he asked the old woman. She smiled, but did not react in any other way.

Michael turned the case in his hands. There was an old brass clasp. He undid it. There was some kind of a game board inside. It looked old. Michael hated board games. Jeremy usually cheated. Now that Michael was old enough to realize that, they rarely played.

Michael closed the clasp again and heard a metallic jingle from inside the leather case. "I had better get going," he said politely. He set the case back in the box.

The old woman shook her head. "Not until you look at it." Michael shrugged, feeling uneasy. He stared at her. She was really small—not very tall and really thin. She reminded him of a scarecrow. "Open it up. Take a better look. I'm certain you're going to like it."

Michael shrugged again and lifted the leather case out of the box. There was something weird about the old woman, he decided as he undid the clasp again. He would look at the game, but then he was going to go home. It wouldn't help anything to put off dealing with his brother anyway. Jeremy wouldn't be nicer in an hour.

Michael tipped the leather case, sliding the game board out. He was careful not to drop any of the game pieces that were caught inside the case. He heard them jingle again, but he didn't bother to take any out. He set the case on the table and opened the board out flat, bending over to look at it.

"Ever see anything like that?" the old woman asked.

Jeremy shook his head. He had been expecting an old checkers set or something. This was much more interesting. There were painted scenes on the board—and it really looked like paint, not like printed paper glued onto cardboard. He leaned over the board for a closer look.

"You won't see anything like it. Not ever again," the old woman said from behind him. She was so close that it startled him and he turned as she laughed a little, patting at her cottony hair. "I don't know if there's another one like it anywhere. I've certainly never seen one."

Michael looked back at the board. It had odd landscapes and swirling clouds. The path that a player had to follow ran through a lot of different scenes. The paintings had incredible detail in them. There was one of a forest—and he could see tiny painted spiders in webs. There were ornate circles and triangles on it. Michael wondered what they meant.

"How much do you want for this?" he asked, looking up.

The old woman had her hands on her hips. "You probably don't have enough. It's old and valuable."

Michael nodded, folding the board closed. "It looks like an antique. Where did it come from?"

The old woman bristled. "Do you really think that's any of your business?" She was frowning again, her old, familiar, unfriendly self.

Michael slid the board back into its case. "Thanks for showing me. I better go home now."

"Wait." It was a command. The old woman was staring at his face again, as though she was trying to remember something. Michael fidgeted, wondering if she really did recognize him. "How much money do you have?"

Michael shook his head. "Not much. Two dollars."

She nodded briskly. "Done. It's yours."

Michael smiled, surprised. "Are you sure?"

The old woman did not return his smile. "Oh, yes. I was hoping you would come by sometime. I knew you liked games."

"Well," Michael said, reaching into his pocket for the money, "I appreciate this. I know it's probably worth a lot more than that."

The old woman was still smiling. "Oh, it is. But I want you to have it."

Michael stepped closer, holding out the bills, crumpled from his jeans pocket. The old woman took them from him with a quick, snatching motion. He felt the dry, rough touch of her fingers for a split second. Then she was turning around, walking away from him. "Go on, then. And share it with your brother."

Michael nodded automatically and started walking, eager to get away from the old woman. He was back on the sidewalk and a few houses down the block before he realized what she had said. How did she know he had a brother? And why would she care who he shared the game with?

Michael shook his head and walked a little faster, remembering. Jeremy had done more than just ride his bike past the old woman's house. He had played tricks on her. Stupid tricks. He would ring the doorbell and then run, or pretend to ask about a lost dog or cat, just to show everyone he wasn't as afraid as they were. Did she remember Jeremy?

Michael shook his head again. It didn't matter. The game was pretty interesting. At least he would have something to do after Jeremy got finished making his life miserable over not making the swim team. He smiled a little, thinking about it. He wasn't going to share the game with Jeremy. He wasn't even going to show it to him.

Jeremy was standing in the kitchen when Michael came in the back door. He had been in the pool. His hair was still wet. "Did you make it?" he demanded, before Michael could get past him.

Michael made a small sound low in his throat that could have been almost any single syllable in the English language and tried to walk past. But of course, Jeremy wouldn't let him.

"Hey, Michael. I asked you a question. Did you make the team or not?"

"They don't announce it at the tryouts. They put up a list on Monday."

Jeremy nodded. "Well, it's probably better that way. Gives you a couple of days to get used to the bad news before you actually have to admit you blew it."

"Jeremy?" Their mother called from her office off the main hallway. "Jeremy, stop razzing Michael. Not everyone can make every team." Michael heard her phone ring. She was usually on the phone, talking about the vitamins and miner-

als she sold. Their father joked that she would be making enough money soon so that he could quit his job. She did sell a lot of vitamins, Michael knew. The utility room was always stacked high with the brown cartons they came in.

Michael looked back at his brother. Jeremy was pretending to sympathize. "Don't be too upset. Maybe you made it, anyway," he said, looking at Michael. "There aren't very many good swimmers this year."

Michael nodded. He hadn't allowed himself to think it, but it was true. He had heard several people saying so, including one of the volunteer assistant coaches. Maybe, if no one was really very good, he stood a chance. And he would get better if he practiced a lot.

"It would take a completely lousy year for you to even be considered," Jeremy whispered. "But maybe you'll get lucky," he said in a normal tone of voice. Then he grinned. "I'm just kidding, Michael. Don't be so serious about it. You have to be able to take a little kidding."

Michael nodded, fighting tears that stung at the back of his eyes. Jeremy noticed, of course.

"Aw, come on, Michael. Toughen up a little. I'm just giving you a hard time. All the kids do it in middle school. You'd better stop being so sensitive to every little thing I say."

Michael nodded, afraid that if he said anything at all his voice would crack or he would sound tearful and give Jeremy something else to make fun of. He stood very still, looking down at his feet. When they had been little, this had been his

way to get rid of Jeremy. If he said nothing and did nothing, his older brother got bored. After about thirty seconds of Michael's silence, Jeremy made a small sound of disgust.

"That's stupid. You look like a little kid. You better learn how to stand up for yourself or middle school is going to be terrible for you. Look at me, Michael." Michael raised his eyes. "It isn't a big deal if you don't make the swim team. Mom's right. And maybe you aren't going to."

Michael looked at his brother. Jeremy was in his I'm-older-and-wiser-and-can-tell-you-how-to-run-your-life mode. It was almost as obnoxious as his teasing mode. Michael nodded vaguely and stepped around his brother. This time, Jeremy let him go.

Michael thudded upstairs, hoping Jeremy wouldn't follow him. Up in his room, Michael set the game on a high shelf above his bed. If Jeremy got a hold of it, he might break it or something. Michael shook his head. His life was upside down. It was supposed to be the other way around, wasn't it? The younger brother was supposed to wreck the older brother's things.

Michael flopped down on his bed and stretched out, his hands behind his head. No matter what Jeremy or his mother said, facts were facts. He probably hadn't made the team and he was not going to let it wreck his summer. Whether he made the team or not, he was going to practice a lot, even though it meant sharing their backyard pool with Jeremy and his competitive teas-

ing. He would just ignore his brother and swim laps until he *was* good enough to make the team.

Michael sat up. What he really felt like doing right now was swimming. He loved the feeling he got after he swam for a long time. And he was sick of Jeremy interfering with what he wanted to do. It was time to stop letting his older brother ruin things for him. Jeremy himself had told him he should learn how to stand up for himself. What better place to start than right here at home?

Michael pulled his still-damp trunks out of his backpack and changed. Once he was downstairs, Michael walked quietly down the hall and into the family room. Then he went out the sliding glass doors into the backyard. Refusing to watch for Jeremy, he crossed the lawn without looking either left or right.

Michael ran to the edge of the pool and dove in. As the cool blue water closed over his head, he began to relax. He loved to swim when he didn't have to worry about swimming faster than someone else. And if he swam long enough, a soft relaxation crept into his muscles.

Michael came to the surface and blew out his breath. He opened his eyes just in time to see Jeremy running, leaping up, and curling into position for a perfect cannonball. Water shot up like fountains from Jeremy's body as he hit. A hard jet splashed into Michael's eyes. It didn't exactly hurt, but it was annoying.

Determined that Jeremy wasn't going to ruin the whole afternoon for him, Michael pushed off

the edge and started swimming laps, a slow, relaxed crawl stroke. He tried to focus on the form of his stroke, reaching to the full length of his arm every time he brought his hands down into the water.

"Hey!"

The voice was so loud and so close that Michael heard it through the water in his ears. He jerked up, and found himself staring into his brother's grinning face. Water had beaded across Jeremy's nose.

"Want to have a breath-holding contest?"

Michael shook his head, feeling his stomach tighten. It would probably be smartest just to give in now and get it over with, but he just couldn't. Not today, when he had decided that Jeremy wasn't going to interfere with everything. Besides, he hated Jeremy's breath-holding contests.

"Come on." Jeremy flat-handed a spray of water into Michael's face. "It'll take your mind off the swim team stuff. And don't forget the possible reward for beating the champ. If you ever actually beat me, I swear I will never tease you about anything again for as long as I live."

Michael looked at the bright blue sky. He looked out across the lawn. Then he looked back at Jeremy's face. "You always win."

Jeremy grinned. "But I might not."

Michael shrugged. "Yes, you will. So what's the point?"

Jeremy, for once, was quiet for a few seconds.

Then he grinned again and shook his head. "Are you scared? Is that it?"

Michael shook his head. "Scared of what?"

Jeremy splashed him again. "Scared of losing. You hate losing. It makes you mad."

Michael shook his head, feeling a familiar tightness forming in his stomach. Jeremy would keep the stupid argument going until he finally gave in and had the contest with him. He always did, no matter how long Michael delayed it. So maybe it was smarter just to give in and get it over with.

"Okay," Michael said aloud. "Tell me the rules."

Jeremy looked surprised. "That easy? You feel all right? Did tryouts take more out of you than I thought?"

Michael frowned. "Just tell me the stupid rules, Jeremy. I'll do it, and then I want you to leave me alone so that I can practice."

Jeremy tipped his head. "Oooooohhh. Practice? Just in case you made the team?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I just like to swim. Come on. Let's get this over with. You change them every time."

"Okay," Jeremy said eagerly. "We count to three together, then we go under. No poking or tickling or anything. But if you start giggling and have to come up, that's the same as having to come up for any other reason—you lose."

Michael almost laughed out loud. Once he got his way, Jeremy was like a little kid, all smiles and enthusiasm. "Okay, I'm ready. But after

this, you have to leave me alone and let me swim."

"Right," Jeremy agreed. "I have to meet Greg and Jason over at the park to play softball anyway."

Michael smiled again. Perfect. He could have a long, warm afternoon all to himself. Maybe he would take out the board game and set it up, just to see what it was like. If Jeremy wasn't going to be around to barge in on him, it might be fun.

"Okay. Deep end or shallow end?"

Michael shrugged. "I don't care. Either one."

Jeremy grinned. "Last time you wanted the shallow end. You're getting braver."

"I don't care that much, Jeremy," Michael said, losing patience. "Let's just do it."

"Okay, okay."

Jeremy swam toward the deep end. Michael followed him, more slowly, keeping his head above water. Once they were in position, Jeremy counted to three and they took four huge breaths in unison, then went under.

Beneath the water, Michael kept his eyes closed for a long time. He knew that Jeremy's were wide open and that he was waiting for Michael to open his. Michael tried hard not to, but it was weird knowing that his brother was staring at him, watching him. It was also weird to float underwater in the darkness behind his own eyelids. He could tell which way was up because he had to paddle gently to keep himself from drifting toward the surface. And he knew he was in their familiar backyard pool with the cracked

cement patio to his right and the lawn to the left—but keeping his eyes closed made the water seem endless, spooky. And he really wasn't sure which way he was facing now. Maybe the patio was behind him, or to his left. For a second, Michael felt almost dizzy. He opened his eyes. And almost screamed.

Jeremy was holding his own throat with both hands. His eyes were wide open and rolled back so that too much of the white showed. His arms and legs looked odd, crooked.

Terrified, Michael reached out to grab his brother and pull him to the surface. But a second before his hands made contact, Jeremy snapped back to life and dodged, grinning, bubbles coming out of his lips.

Angry and unable to hold his breath a second longer, Michael swam to the surface and let his breath explode. "You cheat," he yelled as Jeremy swam up, looking relaxed and amused. "You cheat and then you say you won."

"I did win," Jeremy said casually. "I win every time and I always will."

Trying to think of a good response, Michael accidentally breathed in a little water and coughed. Jeremy gave him a look of mock concern. "Are you all right? Are you drowning? You aren't supposed to try to drink the water, you know."

Michael glared at him but Jeremy only laughed and turned away. He swam to the ladder and climbed out, still chuckling. "Greg and Jason will be waiting for me. I'd better get going."

Michael coughed out the last of the water, furious with himself. Jeremy had sure figured out how to make him feel and act like a fool. He waited until his brother was gone, then began to swim laps. He practiced racing turns at first, then he slowed down and finally stopped, treading water again.

A glint of light made him look up, toward the window of his room. He squinted, trying to see what had caused it. Was Jeremy in there, messing around with his stuff?

As Michael watched, there was another tiny flash of light. He swam for the ladder and climbed out of the pool.

Michael ran into the family room, water running down his legs. He could hear his mother in her office, talking on the phone.

"This vitamin supplement works wonders for people who are just too busy to eat well," she was saying as Michael tiptoed past. As he went up the stairs he tried to be quiet. If Jeremy was up in his room he was going to catch him.

Michael started down the hall, shivering now that he was out of the sun. The door of his room was closed. So was Jeremy's. He watched them both until he came to Jeremy's. He paused, leaning close to the door. He couldn't hear anything. He tapped lightly on the door. There was no answer from within. He opened the door just a

crack and peeked in. Jeremy's room was neat, as it always was. Michael pushed the door open a little farther. Posters of skateboarders were all over the walls. The bed was tightly made, smooth and perfect. There were a few clothes on the back of Jeremy's desk chair. But Jeremy wasn't there.

Michael shut the door silently and went on down the hall. This meant that Jeremy was already gone—or in his room. Michael leaned close to his own door, listening. If he was in there, Jeremy was going to get it this time. Michael thought about just flinging the door open and screaming—that would at least startle Jeremy.

Michael stood, his hand on the doorknob, straining his ears. He would love to catch Jeremy looking through his desk or closet. Michael waited, holding his breath—but he couldn't hear anything. If Jeremy was inside his room, he was standing perfectly still.

Michael began to feel a little silly. Probably Jeremy was on his way down to meet his friends for a ball game—the little flashes of light had probably just been from some car windshield a block away or something.

But if he is in there, Michael thought, I want to catch him at it—and at least make him jump.

Michael took a step back from the door. He stood for a few seconds, then lunged forward and shoved the door open, nearly falling through it, and got ready to yell.

Michael stopped just inside his room. Jeremy wasn't there. But something else was wrong. The dusty leather game case was sitting in the center

of his floor. He glanced up. He had put it on the shelf above his bed, he was sure. So Jeremy was up to his tricks again.

"Jeremy? Are you hiding in here somewhere?"

Michael turned, scanning his room; his gaze swept over his overflowing clothes hamper, the posters on the walls, his old toy trunk, and the closet. There were only a couple of places where Jeremy could hide.

Michael dropped to his knees suddenly and looked under his bed, then stood and pulled open his closet doors. No Jeremy. Well, it was a good trick, he thought. Moving the game from the shelf to the floor would let him know that Jeremy had been in his room. But there wasn't anything he could really get upset about. After all, Jeremy hadn't messed anything up or broken anything.

It still made Michael angry. He had decided that he wasn't even going to show Jeremy the game. Why had Jeremy noticed it? He must have been in here for a while, looking through things, to spot the board game.

Michael picked up the game. He set the case on his bed and opened the brass clamp. It'd be fun to see the game now, without the old woman at the Creepy House staring over his shoulder. He hadn't really looked at it closely before he bought it. He wondered if Jeremy had gone through the whole thing, sitting here, knowing he was safe from interruption. Michael felt another twinge of anger. It was his game. He had paid for it. It wasn't fair that Jeremy got to look at it before he did.

The case opened easily. This time, Michael let the top fall all the way open. The board was folded, the painted side hidden. Michael lifted it out and laid it carefully on his bed. He bent over it, then bounced up and crossed his room to turn on the overhead light. He wanted to see all the details in the paintings this time.

Michael bent over the board again. He looked at the paintings for a moment, then straightened up, frowning. The swirling clouds were gone. He stared at the board. Had he just seen dust on the board or something? Had it been so thick that it had looked like paintings of clouds? He looked for the forest, where he had been able to see the tiny spiders, their delicate webs painted in such minute strokes that . . .

Michael stared at the top of the board and ran his eyes back and forth over it, not missing a square inch. There was no painting of a forest. The scenes were of deserts and bleak cliffs. Finally, almost at the bottom, he found a few spiders painted into one of the scenes, but they were on the ground, barely visible behind rocks in a rugged landscape.

Michael sat back. Boy, he must have been a lot more nervous at the garage sale than he had realized. The old woman had made him uncomfortable. But how could he have made up paintings that didn't exist?

He picked up the board and turned it over, half expecting to see the forests and swirling clouds on the other side—but of course there was only the black cloth backing. Michael ran his hands

over it. Then he picked up the case and looked inside. Maybe there were two boards? But no, the case was empty. Its dark red velvet lining was in good shape—there were no tears or stains.

Michael shook his head, puzzled. He had heard clinking inside, like the sound of game pieces rattling. He was sure of it. He pressed his fingers into the lining, feeling for pockets, or a hidden tear where the pieces could have slipped through and fallen out of sight. Then he ran one finger around the seams, pushing hard to make sure there was nothing between the velvet lining and the leather of the case.

A sudden piercing pain made Michael lurch to his feet. There was a single drop of blood on his fingertip. He shook his finger, turning in a circle, furious with himself. That had been stupid. "Way to go," he said aloud. "Stab yourself on a hundred-year-old tack. Brilliant."

Then Michael stared at the tip of his finger. It was really turning red. Maybe the spiders he had seen had been real, not painted and one of them had just bitten him. He looked down into the case, pulling the velvet lining in one direction, then another. His finger was really throbbing now.

"Hey, Michael," Jeremy called from the hallway. "I'm home. Did you want to swim a little more before dinner?"

Michael folded the game board and in one swift motion he slid it back into the case. This time, instead of putting it back on the shelf, he hid it

under his bed. Then he jumped up and flung open the door.

Jeremy arched his eyebrows, pretending to be surprised. "I thought maybe you were still out in the pool practicing. You aren't going to make the team next year without working hard, you know."

Michael frowned at his brother. "Just keep quiet about the team, Jeremy. And stay out of my room."

Jeremy looked puzzled. "Why would I go into your room?"

"You know what I'm talking about." Michael scowled. He hated it when Jeremy acted like this, trying to fool him about things.

Jeremy grinned. "I wasn't in your room. I can't imagine why I would want to be. It's always a mess and besides, *you're* usually in there. That's the worst part." Jeremy laughed and Michael knew he really thought he was being funny. Michael had heard Jeremy with his friends and they all teased each other like this.

"Just stay out of my room," Michael said again.

Jeremy shook his head. "Right. Sure will. Whatever you say, Michael."

Michael felt like screaming at Jeremy. Jeremy always had some sarcastic comeback for anything Michael said. Michael turned and went back into his room, closing the door behind himself. His finger was still throbbing. He looked at it. The redness was getting worse and it had swollen a little, but not too badly. He had been bitten by something, he was sure. This didn't feel at all like a simple puncture from a tack.

Michael flopped down on his bed. He would get a bottle of bug spray and squirt the inside of the game case later on, when Jeremy was busy enough so that he wouldn't be curious. Once he knew there were no bugs or spiders inside, he was going to figure out what had made the clinking sound that he had heard at the garage sale.

4

The next day after school, Michael walked as calmly as he could to the end of the hall where the lists for the summer swim team had been posted. He scanned the names, and nearly dropped his books when he saw his own. Then he read the heading at the top of the list. PROVISIONAL ACCEPTANCE it said. Two names below his, he saw Kevin's. So they would both have to work hard to get on the team. Michael saw Mr. Hardy coming toward him down the hall.

"Hi. You're one of the provisionals aren't you?"

Michael nodded. "Yes. What does it mean?"

Coach Hardy smiled at him. "It means if you work hard over the next few weeks and improve your time and skills, you're on the team."

Michael stood up straighter. He had been planning to swim laps every day anyway. And he wouldn't be as nervous the next time, he was sure. "I'll make it," he said out loud.

Coach Hardy smiled again. "I wouldn't doubt

it a bit. You're Jeremy Dalton's brother, aren't you?"

Michael nodded, his spirits falling.

Coach Hardy gripped his shoulder. "Well, if you're willing to practice, you'll do fine. I watched you closely the other day at tryouts. You have great natural form."

Michael found himself looking Coach Hardy in the eye. "I do? Really?"

Coach Hardy smiled. "You sure do. Swim as much as you can in the next few weeks. Your family has a pool, right?"

Michael nodded.

"You're lucky there, son. Makes it easier to practice. Work on form, the speed will come later on."

Michael watched Coach Hardy walk away. He felt great. He would go home and swim until his lungs ached. He would work and work at it until he was the best swimmer Coach Hardy had ever seen. Michael imagined the cool, wonderful water closing over his head. A sudden sharp ache in his finger made him wince.

He held up his index finger and looked at it. The redness and swelling had almost gone away, but the puncture was still there. And the ache was fierce enough to make it hard to think about anything else. After about twenty or thirty seconds, it subsided. Michael stared at his finger. The mark was about as big as a pinprick. What had made it suddenly start hurting like that?

Forgetting about his finger, Michael took one last look at the swim team lists, then turned and

walked down the hallway, whistling. Halfway to the front doors he ran into Kevin.

"Did I make it?" Kevin asked, his face tense.

"We're both on the provisional acceptance list," Michael told him, pronouncing "provisional" the way Coach Hardy had.

Kevin wrinkled his nose. "What's that mean?"

Michael explained.

Kevin nodded. "That's all right for you. But we don't have a pool and I bet my mother can't drive me over to the community center more than once a week. She has to work late."

"You can come swim laps at our house if you want," Michael said.

Kevin's face lit up. "Really? That'd be perfect. Are you sure?"

Michael nodded. His parents wouldn't care at all, he was sure, as long as his mom was home and they followed basic safety rules. "We can swim laps at the same time. The pool is big enough—Jeremy and I used to do it all the time. Whenever he needed to beat somebody."

Kevin started toward the front doors and Michael fell into step beside him. Kevin shoved the doors open wide enough for both of them to get through. "Is your brother on the swim team this year?"

"Of course," Michael answered as they started down the sidewalk.

Kevin shifted his books from one arm to the other. "He's good. My sister says all the girls like him."

Michael nodded, feeling his spirits sink again.

It was hard having Jeremy for an older brother. "Want to come over and swim this afternoon?"

Kevin nodded. "Sure. I have to go home first though and tell my sister where I'll be. Mom puts her in charge until five when she gets home."

"I'll wait for you," Michael said as they stepped off the curb to cross a side street. "I'll do my homework while you go home and come back." He smiled. "I usually put it off as long as I can, so that ought to shock my mother."

Kevin laughed. They walked a little faster. When they got to Kevin's street, he turned. "See you in half an hour or so."

"Okay," Michael said, waving. He walked a little faster once Kevin had turned off. He wanted to have as much time to practice as possible. Then, in front of his own house, Michael paused. He really didn't want to tell Jeremy about being on the provisional list. He clenched his hands into fists. It would have been so much better if he had just made the team. Then Jeremy wouldn't have been able to tease him at all. This way, he would be hearing about the provisional list for weeks—until the second tryouts at least. And if he didn't make the team then, he would hear about it all summer long.

Michael took a deep breath and went in. He peeked into his mother's office and she smiled and waved at him, one hand on the phone receiver.

"This supplement is perfect for someone too busy to eat as well as they should," she said into

the phone, smiling at Michael. He closed the door gently and turned back into the hall.

As he clomped up the stairs, Michael felt pretty good. He was going to make the team. All he had to do was work hard. He opened the door to his room and went in, throwing his backpack on his bed. He had a little math homework, not too much. This late in the year Mrs. Bell seemed to be slowing down the homework express she was known for. Michael was glad.

Michael hurried through the math problems. He wanted to get in a few laps before Kevin showed up. Once he was done he put his books away and stood up. It took about one minute to change into swim trunks. He started out his door, grabbing the knob and pulling it open. A little pain in his index finger reminded him about the spider bite, or whatever it was. That reminded him of the game.

Turning back, Michael walked over to his bed and flipped up the edge of the bedspread. The game wasn't there. He leaned down, putting his cheek on the carpet, staring into the shadows beneath his bed. He hadn't accidentally kicked it farther under. It just wasn't there.

Michael got to his feet, looking around his room. The game wasn't back on the shelf above his bed, nor was it lying on the floor.

"Hey, little brother."

Jeremy was standing in the doorway, his head cocked to one side. "So how did it go? Did you make it?"

Michael glared at Jeremy, wishing that he

hadn't left his door standing open. He took a deep breath. He thought about lying, then decided against it. He didn't like lying, and besides, it wouldn't work for long. Jeremy knew Coach Hardy and he would say something to him eventually that would lead to the truth.

"I made the provisional list," Michael said as evenly as he could. "So did Kevin. He'll be over to practice in a little while. We both really want to make the team."

"Provisional list?" Jeremy pursed his lips. "They never let anyone on the team from the provisional list, Michael. It's just a way to keep the parents and kids from going nuts when they don't make it at tryouts. It's how they let you down easy. Probably everyone who tried out was on one list or the other."

Michael pressed his lips together. Was that true? He tried to remember if there was anyone at tryouts whose name wasn't on either list. He couldn't remember. "I want you to stay out of my room, Jeremy," he said suddenly, remembering the board game. "And I want what you stole back—right now. Where did you put it?"

Jeremy tilted his head to the other side, his brows arching so high that they nearly met over his nose. "Put what?"

"You know what I'm talking about," Michael said. "That board—ahhhh!" A stabbing pain in his finger cut off what he was saying. The instant after it came, it was gone, and Michael was left breathing hard, facing his brother.

"What's wrong with you?" Jeremy demanded.

"Are you so upset about the team that you're acting weird?"

"Nothing is wrong with me," Michael said hotly. "I have this spider bite or something on my finger, that's all."

Jeremy nodded. "Of course. A spider bite or something on your finger. I should have known." He shook his head and turned back into the hall. Michael watched him open his own door and disappear into his room.

Angry and confused by the sudden stab of pain in his finger, Michael slammed his door closed. He would go down to swim in a few minutes. First, he just wanted to be alone for a little bit.

Michael flopped down on his bed, using one foot to shove his book bag off the bed. It hit the floor solidly, his books heavy enough to make a loud thump. Jeremy was getting harder and harder to put up with. The board game wasn't just moved this time, it was gone. It was probably in Jeremy's room and he was looking at it this very minute.

The thought made Michael stand up and start for the door. He was really tired of Jeremy bossing him around and picking on him—but at least he had never taken his things before. This was too much.

"Kevin is here," Michael heard his mother call from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'll be down in a minute," Michael yelled back.

He stopped in front of Jeremy's door and hesitated a second before he knocked.

"Yeah?"

Michael opened the door about six inches. "I want you to put it back. This isn't funny. I'll tell Mom and Dad on you if you don't." Before Jeremy could answer, Michael closed the door and started for the stairs. When he was about halfway down, he saw Kevin, standing inside the front door. Then he heard Jeremy thudding down the stairs behind him.

"You're a dork, you know that?" Jeremy raised his voice so that Kevin could hear. "My brother is a goofball, Kev," he called. "Keep an eye on him."

"Right," Kevin said quickly, putting the same joking tone in his voice that Jeremy always had. "Him and you, both. It runs in families you know."

Jeremy laughed and went back up the stairs.

"You just have to come back at him," Kevin said on their way to the pool. "If you played along and insulted him back, he'd back off a little."

Michael shook his head. "It works for you, it wouldn't for me. He's different with me. I'm just the luckiest little brother in the whole world, I guess."

"What were you guys talking about, anyway?" Kevin stopped at the edge of the pool and sat down to pull off his sneakers and socks. He had his trunks on with a shirt. He undid shirt buttons while Michael waited. "Did he swipe something of yours? My sister does that. Socks, mostly, but sometimes she takes other stuff."

"He's been coming into my room lately," Michael explained. "He moved things around once. But today something is missing."

Kevin dove in and came up, treading water near the ladder. "What?"

Michael hesitated. He didn't want to explain about the board game. Kevin would be curious about it—he would remember the old woman they called the Creepy House Witch. And right now Michael didn't want to think about her, or the board game, or his obnoxious older brother. He just wanted to swim. "It just made me mad, that's all," he said.

"Maybe you should tell your folks."

Michael nodded. "I might."

"So what was it that he took?" Kevin repeated.

Michael felt a small ache in the tip of his finger. That was weird. He would have thought that the cool water would soothe the spider bite, not make it worse.

"Was it your softball mitt?"

Michael looked back at Kevin. "No. It was something I bought at a garage sale. It was an old—ow!" The surge of pain in his finger caught him so off guard that he took in a mouthful of water and choked on it.

Michael had to cough for a long time, sitting on the edge of the pool, watching Kevin swim laps. By the time he finally got in and started practicing his stroke, it was pretty late and getting chilly. He was determined to get in at least a little practice, though, so he kept going.

Michael swam laps steadily. Kevin worked hard too, careful to stay far enough to one side so that they both had plenty of room. "You're good, Michael," he said as they got out of the pool, shiv-

ering as the day cooled into evening. They used the towels that Michael's mother kept hanging from a wooden rack by the family room door. When they were dry enough to go in, they rehung the towels and stepped onto the carpet.

Can I come tomorrow?" Kevin asked on his way out.

Michael nodded. "Sure. I want to practice like this every day if I can."

Kevin left and Michael went upstairs, eager to shower off the pool water, warm up, and change into dry clothes. Passing Jeremy's door, he thought about the board game. He was going to tell his parents at dinner. Maybe they could make Jeremy stay out of his room.

Michael thought about what Kevin had said. Maybe if he could start joking with Jeremy, they would get along better. It just seemed like all of Jeremy's jokes were about *him*. And why should he have to think up a bunch of stupid insults just so his brother would leave him alone and stay out of his room? It wasn't fair. At dinner, Michael decided as he pushed open his door, he was going to say something to his parents. Michael went into his room and flipped on the light. He gasped, unable to believe his eyes.

15

The game board was in the center of his floor again, and sitting on top of it was the biggest, ugliest spider that Michael had ever seen. It was as big as his hand, its hairy legs as long as his fingers.

Michael was about to run to the kitchen for the broom, or bug spray, when he heard Jeremy laughing behind him.

"Pretty cool, huh? They were selling them down at Atkins when I went to get a folder for that report I had to do on Benjamin Franklin."

Michael turned to face his brother. "Very funny, Jeremy." He tried to make his voice jokey, like the spider hadn't really scared him at all. "It's great. It's hairy and everything, like a tarantula."

Jeremy was staring at him. "What? What are you talking about now?"

"I am talking about the plastic—" Michael began.

"Snake," Jeremy interrupted him. "Right. So

what do you mean it's hairy like a tarantula? You mean it looks like a cobra, don't you? Michael, you are so goofy sometimes."

"Michael?"

It was their mother, calling from the foot of the stairs. "What, Mom?" Michael called back.

"Come here for a second, please."

Michael glared at Jeremy, pulling his door closed as he started for the stairs. "Snake? You're the goof, not me, Jeremy. And your jokes really aren't that funny."

"Michael, hurry please," his mother called. He trotted to the stairs and went down, his footsteps quick and angry. His mother was smiling at him.

"Just sit by my phone for two minutes, will you?" Michael's mother asked. "I have to get something out of the car before this woman calls back—but I don't want her to get the answering machine. I'm afraid she'll hang up. If she calls before I get here, just be polite and ask her to wait for a moment."

Michael went into his mother's office. Vitamin brochures were scattered across her desk, along with the notes she kept on every conversation she had with a customer. People loved his mother. She made every single person who talked to her feel special. That was probably why she sold so many vitamins. He liked answering her phone for her. He liked saying, "Mountain Blue Vitamins, may I help you?"

Michael plopped into his mother's office chair and swiveled it in a circle. He was still wound up and angry, and that upset him even more. He

shook his head. It was stupid. "That's it," Michael decided aloud. "This is the last time I get mad like this. From now on, I ignore Jeremy."

His mother came in, smiling. "Thank you so much. It didn't ring did it?"

Michael shook his head, startled out of his thoughts. His mother thanked him again and he realized that she wanted him to get up out of her chair so that she could go back to work. A lot of her customers were gone all day at their jobs, so she had to make calls at night.

Michael went back up the stairs, bristling with determination. Jeremy wasn't going to upset him again. Not ever. No matter what he said, or what he did.

Just as Michael got to the top of the stairs, he heard the sound of a door closing. He paused for a second, listening. Had it been Jeremy's or his own?

Michael hurried down the hall. Maybe Jeremy had gone in and moved the plastic spider to another spot—or maybe he had hidden the game again. "Whatever he did," Michael told himself, "you are not going to react. At all. You will simply do your homework and forget about your brother for a while."

Michael opened his door cautiously. The light was still on. His knees gave a little involuntary jerk when he saw the snake on his bed, right up by the pillow. Then he almost laughed. So Jeremy had bought a huge tarantula *and* a snake. The snake did look like a cobra. It was raised up, a hood flaring from its body. Michael walked over

to it. Up close, it was obviously fake. He could see the lines from the mold that had been used to make the snake. They looked like seams running down its soft, plastic body. The eyes were a little off center, too. One was slightly higher than the other. The tarantula had looked much more real.

Michael looked around his room to see what Jeremy had done this time. The floor was empty. The dusty case that held the board game was gone, and so was the enormous tarantula.

Michael rubbed one hand across his face. What was Jeremy trying to prove? Michael went to the door and eased it open an inch or two. The hall was empty.

Michael turned and cautiously crossed his room, looking behind him every few seconds. That tarantula had been huge. *Huge and ugly.* Even though he knew it was plastic, he wanted to find it now if Jeremy had left it in here. He did not want to step on it later when he had half forgotten about it. He'd probably yell or something and then Jeremy would get the laugh out of this that he wanted.

Michael knelt down beside his bed. He heard his door click open, then Jeremy's derisive laughter. He jumped to his feet.

"You look so funny," Jeremy said from the doorway. "What are you looking for? More snakes?" He laughed. "Hey, that was good, about the spider."

Michael nodded, trying to smile. "It sure was."

Jeremy looked away for a second, then his eyes

darted to one side as he looked past Michael and pretended to cringe. "Snake!"

Michael managed to keep from flinching. Jeremy raised one hand to point at the plastic cobra by Michael's pillow, then bent over laughing.

"You are pretty funny," Michael told him. "I have homework to do now, though, Jeremy."

"Dinner in fifteen minutes," Michael's mother called up the stairs. "Your Dad called. He's bringing fried chicken."

"That sounds good," Michael said, looking straight at Jeremy. "Doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Jeremy mumbled. "Sure. Whatever you say, Michael." He backed toward the door. "You really are weird."

Michael didn't answer. He just waited for Jeremy to go out the door and close it. Then he walked over and pushed the door knob in, locking it. Then he looked around his room. There weren't too many places that Jeremy could have hidden the tarantula. It had to be somewhere under or in his bed, or in the closet. Michael started with the closet.

It took a few minutes for him to move his softball equipment aside and to go through his piled-up dirty clothes. He even flipped through his old picture books on the top shelf. Nothing. He checked the stuff in the built-in drawers, then looked under his extra blanket, folded in the back corner behind his old Halloween costumes. There was no big hairy plastic spider. There wasn't anything except his own junk.

"So maybe it's under the bed," Michael said out

loud. He smiled. The stupid plastic tarantula had scared him, he could tell. That's why he was talking to himself. Back when he had been afraid of the dark he had talked to himself for a while almost every night before he had managed to go to sleep.

"Well, you aren't afraid of the dark anymore. But you are still afraid of spiders," Michael told himself. He grimaced as he got down on his knees to look under his bed. It took him a few seconds to work up his courage to move the bedspread so that he could see. The truth was, he hated spiders. Spiders had always scared him. The idea of having a tarantula in his sheets made him nervous—even a toy one. There was a name for his fear, he knew. He had seen a program on TV about it. Spiders were part of the family of invertebrate land animals called arachnids. So being afraid of them was called arachniphobia.

Michael took a deep breath and flipped up the bedspread so he could see under the bed. He could see the game board case this time, so at least Jeremy hadn't hidden it again. But there was no tarantula. Maybe Jeremy had taken the spider out with him so that he could pretend that there had never been anything except the plastic snake. Michael nodded to himself. That was the kind of trick Jeremy liked to play—something he could tease Michael about for a long time.

Michael pulled out the case, sighing in relief. He was glad that Jeremy had returned it and he was glad that he had taken the tarantula away. Had Jeremy looked at the board game? If he had

he wasn't saying anything about it. Or maybe that was another trick?

Michael opened the case carefully. Whatever had bitten him was probably still inside it. He could see the edge of the game board, though. So at least Jeremy hadn't taken that out. Michael started to stick his hand in, then hesitated. He decided to go down to the kitchen to get the bug spray. It would only take a few minutes and it'd be worth it not to get bitten again. Who knew what kind of weird bugs or spiders had gotten into the board game? Especially in the Creepy House Witch's garage.

The hallway was empty as Michael came out of his room. He could hear Jeremy's radio, blasting out the fast, distorted guitars and vocals his parents couldn't stand. The truth was he didn't like it very much either, but he pretended to so that Jeremy wouldn't make fun of his taste in music too. Michael squared his shoulders on his way down the stairs. He was going to tell Jeremy what he really thought about that kind of music one of these days.

Michael had gotten the bug spray out from under the kitchen sink and was on his way back upstairs with it when his father came in the front door.

"Fried chicken, arriving at gate number three," he shouted out. Michael stopped and turned around.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hey there, Michael," his father answered, smiling. "Hungry?"

Michael nodded.

His father looked happy to hear it. But then, his father usually looked happy. "Go get your brother and tell him that dinner is ready. I'll get the table set."

"I already did it," Michael's mother said, coming out of her office. She kissed his father on the cheek. "Hey, Michael," she said, turning. "I forgot to ask earlier—what did you find out about the swim team?"

Michael explained to her about the provisional list. She smiled and his father nodded.

"So Kevin is going to come over and practice a lot if it's all right," Michael said.

"Sure," his father said.

His mother nodded. "As long as you don't let your homework go."

"You'll make it," his father said. He pointed at the bug spray in Michael's hand. "Ants? Or spiders?"

Michael nodded. "Spiders." He didn't want to explain about the board game.

His father just smiled. "Come back down for dinner in a couple of minutes."

Michael went up the stairs. He went into his own room and knelt down beside the board game case. He opened it carefully and aimed the spray can inside. He gave it two long squirts, then closed the case. The fake perfume smell of the spray was so sweet and strong that it almost made him feel sick. Michael stood up and moved away until he was breathing fresh air.

"Come on you two. Dinner!" Michael heard his

father yell up the stairs. He set down the bug spray and hurried out. He pounded on Jeremy's door on his way past.

The music was suddenly muted. "Dinner!" Michael yelled through the door. Jeremy mumbled something and Michael just kept going down the hall. After dinner he was going to take a good look at the board game. Then he was going to hide it where Jeremy couldn't find it.

Michael heard Jeremy come out of his room as he started down the stairs. "Hey, wait up."

Michael turned to look at his brother. "What?"

Jeremy smiled. "I just wondered if you were still imagining spiders crawling around in your room." He gestured at the can of bug spray.

Michael lifted the can. "No. One bit me." He showed Jeremy the pink, slightly swollen tip of his index finger.

"Right," Jeremy said, shaking his head. "And it was big and hairy like a tarantula."

Michael felt himself flushing. "Just stop it, Jeremy. You put that plastic tarantula in my room and you know it."

Jeremy was shaking his head. "I put a plastic *snake* in your room, Michael. A snake. Not a spider."

Michael watched his brother go past him. Jeremy was acting like he was telling the truth. And as obnoxious as Jeremy could be, he didn't usually lie. Michael felt odd inside, like something awful was about to happen. He felt a tingling ache in the tip of his finger as he headed for the kitchen.

Michael woke up the next morning feeling weird. He lay still for a second. He had done his homework the night before, then he had been so tired that he had gone straight to bed without looking at the board game at all. But all night long he'd had nightmares. Nightmares about huge spiders with bristly, hairy legs and eyes like faceted gemstones that glittered.

"Yuck," Michael said out loud. "Thanks for the great dreams, Jeremy."

He swung his feet to the floor and sat up. The board game case was still lying in the middle of his room. Michael padded over to it. It still smelled like bug spray. He picked it up and laid it on his bed, then crossed the room to his closet, yawning. He would just get ready for school, then look at it until it was time to go.

It took Michael about five minutes to get dressed. He made his bed and set the board game in front of him. Then he opened the cover cautiously.

"Michael? Are you up?"

It was his father's voice, just outside his door. "I'm awake," Michael called out. Then he heard his father walking to Jeremy's door and calling out the same question. Michael usually woke up without an alarm clock, but his father checked every morning, just to make sure, so they wouldn't be late getting to school.

Michael lifted the game case again and slowly eased the board out. He held it carefully between two fingers, setting it down at a distance from him on the bed. He slid his finger between the halves and flicked it open. No spiders. The tip of his finger ached only a little and he smiled. The bite was much better. It was almost gone.

The scenes on the board were as amazing as he had remembered. He still couldn't see any clouds, or spider webs, so maybe he had imagined things from the coating of dust that had been on the board. Now he could see other details he'd missed at first. He pulled the board toward him and accidentally bumped the case. It slid off the edge of the bed and hit the floor.

Michael heard the soft clinking sound that he had heard the first time he had handled the case. He bent over to pick it up and shook it, open end down, over the bedspread. Four game tokens fell onto the bed.

They were all insects, cast in some kind of heavy silvery metal. Michael picked them up one at a time and turned them over in his hands. One was a centipede—and each tiny leg was perfectly made. There was a scorpion, its curving tail real-

istically segmented. The third piece was a beetle, so real that Michael half expected it to crawl away when he set it down to pick up the fourth piece. This one was the strangest of all. It was a spider, its legs covered with tiny silver metal hairs. Michael set it down gently, his breath a little uneven. What a weird coincidence. It wasn't just a spider, he thought. It was a tarantula. Except for the silver color and its size, this little metal tarantula was exactly the same as the plastic one Jeremy had set on the game case. His finger ached again, in response to his thoughts about spiders.

Michael sat up straight, and for the first time he noticed a die that had rolled out of the case, too. It was white, and instead of having little dots for the numbers, it had small triangles. It felt hard and cold, like it was made of stone. Michael looked at it more closely. The triangles were some kind of dark stone, set into what looked like white marble or maybe alabaster, like the heavy candy dish his mother had bought in Mexico on their last vacation.

Michael picked up the case one more time and shook it again. There was no sound this time, but a piece of yellowed paper fluttered out.

" 'Rules of the game.' " Michael read the thin, spidery writing across the top. The writing was in black ink, and very precise, every letter the same size and slant. Still, it looked like someone had written it and not like it had been printed.

There were only four rules.

1) Protect from water.
2) Do not move game board during game.
3) Handle tokens carefully.
4) Roll dice until last player finishes.

Michael read the paper two or three times. He turned it over, but the other side was completely blank. He sighed. He had been hoping that the rules would explain how to play the old game. This was more like care and handling instructions. Well, he would make sure it didn't get wet. As if he couldn't have figured that out for himself.

Michael pulled the open board closer and picked up the four tokens again. They were so real looking it almost gave him the creeps to hold them. He looked at the scorpion. Its eyes seemed to focus on his. It was so eerie that he set the tokens down again, and stood up.

"This is stupid," Michael said aloud. "Why am I afraid of a bunch of metal bugs?"

"Are you talking to yourself in there?"

It was Jeremy's voice. Michael swept the tokens up in one hand and put them back in the case. He slid the board in, too, then shoved the case beneath his mattress.

"Hey! Are you ready or not? Mom has breakfast made."

"I'm coming," Michael said, hesitating. Under the mattress was a pretty obvious place. But he couldn't think of a better one right now. And besides, Jeremy had already moved the game around twice. If he had been very interested in

it, he would have kept it, or said something about it by now. Or would he?

Michael gathered up his books and faced the closed door. Maybe Jeremy had the directions. Or maybe there were other tokens. The care instructions mentioned dice, not a single die. Michael felt a stab of anger. That would be something Jeremy might do. He'd keep the directions so that Michael never really learned how to play the game, or he'd take one of the dice and hang onto it just because it was made of stone and interesting to look at.

Michael opened his door. Jeremy had already gone downstairs. "I'll be right there," Michael shouted down the hall. Then he turned and went into Jeremy's room.

The window was open and the sun was streaming in. Jeremy's room was neat as usual. He didn't like clothes on his floor or messes of any kind on his dresser. Michael searched through his things quickly, looking under the bed and on the high shelf in the closet. his pulse was speeding and he felt guilty. He hated it when Jeremy went into his room—it felt wrong to do the same thing himself.

Michael went back out into the hall, closing the door behind him. He started toward the stairs at the exact instant that Jeremy appeared on them, coming back up.

"Mom said to find out what was taking you so long this morning."

Michael tried to fake a smile. "Nothing. I'm coming right now."

He followed his brother down the stairs, and ate the oatmeal his mother had made. Then, when Jeremy was leaving, Michael made an excuse to run back upstairs.

"I'm not going to wait," Jeremy told him. "I don't want to be late because you forgot your homework or something. And I have farther to walk."

Michael nodded. "Fine." He waited until Jeremy had gone out the front door, then he ran back upstairs and went into his brother's room. This time he stood at the center of the carpet and looked around, thinking hard. Where would Jeremy hide something small like a die or game rules?

His eyes fell on Jeremy's old toy trunk. It stood at the foot of the bed. Michael opened it quietly. It was full of worn-out old toys, mostly. There were some of Jeremy's old drawings from grade school, too.

"Michael?" His mother sounded impatient. He knew she hated for him to get to school late. If he had to stay after school, she would come get him so he wouldn't have to walk home alone—but it interrupted her afternoon calls.

"I'm coming," Michael yelled back. He closed Jeremy's door and turned toward his own room. He wanted to hide the game somewhere better, just in case Jeremy got home before he did.

Michael flopped his backpack onto the floor and crossed his room, his eyes skimming the walls, the furniture. Maybe he should put the game in

his dirty clothes stack. Jeremy might not think of looking there.

Hurrying, he bent to pull up the edge of his mattress, shoving his hand beneath it to grab the game. His fingers jammed into the box spring and he bent lower, astonished. When he couldn't see the game case, he dropped to his knees, pushing the mattress up higher. It wasn't there. The game had vanished.

7

After school, Michael ran into Kevin in the hall.

"Are you going to swim this afternoon? Is it all right if I come over?"

Michael nodded, and tried to smile at Kevin. But he felt strange. He had been feeling that way all day. No matter what else was going on around him, his mind had been asking the same question over and over. *Where could the game have gone?*

Jeremy couldn't have moved it. He hadn't left the kitchen for even a few seconds during breakfast. And if Jeremy wasn't the one moving the game around and hiding it from him, who was? Michael kept remembering everything the Creepy House Witch had said, too. She had *told* him to share the game with his brother. Why? She didn't know Jeremy, not really. She didn't know either one of them. Nothing made any sense.

"Hey, Michael," Kevin interrupted his thoughts. "Can I come over to swim or not?

Michael focused on his friend. "Sure. Of

course." He ran a hand back through his hair. "I thought we were going to try to swim every afternoon between now and the second tryouts."

Kevin smiled, looking at him closely. "I want to. Is something wrong? Is Jeremy bugging you more than usual or something?"

Michael shook his head. "No. Nothing is wrong. I was just thinking, that's all."

Kevin led the way down the steps, weaving in and out of the groups of kids who stood talking. Michael followed, his mind still whirling with questions. As soon as he got home he was going to find the board game, no matter what. If Jeremy had it, he was going to be sorry.

"Is your father going to help with the swim team this year?" Kevin asked.

Michael shook his head. "I don't think so. He only got involved the summer that Jeremy was on the team."

"Maybe if you make the team, he'll do it again," Kevin said.

Michael nodded. It was a possibility. "But he has been working really long hours lately," he told Kevin. "I almost never see him. I don't like it."

Kevin kicked a pebble down the gutter. "Your father is cool. He was great at that Halloween party last year."

Michael grinned. His father *was* fun and he was funny, too. He had dressed up as a vampire and walked around scaring everyone all night. An idea came to Michael that hadn't occurred to him before. Maybe his father was moving the

board game around, playing tricks on him. Would he?

Michael shook his head. That was silly. His father wasn't home enough to be playing jokes with the game. But what other explanation was there? The game wasn't moving itself around, was it? A strange feeling spread from his stomach upward through his body. Maybe something was going on here that he hadn't thought about at all. Maybe it was something . . . weird.

"I'll see you as soon as I go home and change," Kevin was saying.

Jolted out of his thoughts, Michael realized they were almost at his corner. He smiled, trying to cover up his surprise. He couldn't really remember anything they had said since they left school.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Kevin asked.

Michael nodded. "Sure. See you later."

Kevin waved and walked on as Michael turned onto his street.

Michael hurried home, hoping to beat Jeremy. He usually did even when he wasn't trying. Jeremy had a longer walk—by about ten minutes—and the middle school got out about twenty minutes later. Unless he stayed after school for some reason, Michael was usually home about a half hour before his brother.

Once he was up in his room, Michael changed into his swimming trunks as quickly as he could, leaving his shirt on. Then he lifted the mattress and bent to look. No game. He flipped the bedspread back down, then sat on the edge of his

bed, trying to think. Jeremy hadn't left the kitchen, had he? Michael closed his eyes, trying to remember. Some mornings, Jeremy ran back upstairs for something. Had he done it this morning? He had to have done it. What other explanation could there be?

Unsure of what else to do, Michael crossed the hall and opened Jeremy's door very quietly. He went in, feeling very guilty, but determined to figure out what was going on. He went through the whole room, moving quickly. It didn't take long. Jeremy's drawers were full of carefully folded clothes. It was easy to search for the game. But he couldn't find it.

After a few minutes, Michael gave up and went out, closing the door carefully behind him. The game just wasn't there. So where had it gone? Had Jeremy put it somewhere else in the house? Or had someone else moved it? His mother? Michael frowned. His mother wasn't a practical joker like his brother—and sometimes his dad. But where could the game be now? Who moved it?

"Great progress, buddy. Those are the same two questions you were asking yourself this morning," Michael said as he opened the door to his own room. As he pushed it inward, he heard a strange, shuffling noise and froze. What was that? He stood, listening to the sound of his own heart for a few seconds. "It was nothing," he scolded himself. "You're just jumpy now because you've been jumpy all day."

Michael shoved the door wide open, refusing to

stand in the hall any longer. He was tired of scaring himself over nothing. He went in. His room looked absolutely normal. Nothing was out of place that wasn't usually out of place. His bedspread was still flipped up . . .

Michael stared. He had looked beneath his mattress just before he'd left to search Jeremy's room, but he thought he remembered pulling the bedspread back down. Hadn't he? He crossed to the bed and cautiously raised the edge of the spread a little higher. He didn't have to lift the mattress this time—he could see the edge of the game case peeking from beneath it. Michael pulled the game out and lowered the spread, sinking down to sit on his bed.

The case was still open. Michael pulled the board out, his heart thudding in his chest. When he opened it, the paintings seemed to move for an instant and he blinked. Then he frowned. He had himself so nervous that he was imagining things.

"Kevin is here," his mother called up the stairs.

Michael jumped up and the case fell to the floor, the tokens spilling out in a little heap. He snatched them up and half tossed them onto the game board. He hurried to his door, opening it wider, trying to step out into the hall before Kevin got too close. But it was too late. Kevin was standing right in front of him.

"Hi."

Michael tried to smile, but his heart was still thudding. He took a deep breath. This was absurd. Nothing had moved on the game board.

How could paint *move?* Without meaning to, he turned and looked back at his bed. The silver tokens were arranged on the board, neatly, all four standing on a single square. He stared and Kevin took a step forward.

"That's cool. What game is it?"

Michael turned to face him. "It's old. I bought it at a garage sale. The pieces aren't all here."

Kevin was walking past him. "It's still cool. How old is it? The board looks like someone painted it."

Michael nodded, following Kevin to stand beside his bed. He couldn't stop staring at the tokens. He had *thrown* them up there. How could they have landed lined up like that, all on one square?

"Even the dice are pretty neat," Michael heard Kevin say.

He almost gasped as Kevin bent to pick up two dice from the floor beside the case. One he recognized. The other was black with white triangles set into it.

"Wow," Kevin said.

"You guys going to swim again today?"

Jeremy's voice from the door spun Michael back around. His brother was leaning against the doorjamb wearing his swim trunks and an unbuttoned shirt. Michael saw a look of interest cross Jeremy's face. "Hey, what's that?"

Michael frowned. Jeremy looked genuinely puzzled—as if he had never seen the game before.

"Michael got it at a garage sale," Kevin put in.

He set the dice down carefully beside the board. Then he picked up the scorpion token. "Wow," he exclaimed.

"Let me see," Jeremy said suddenly. He stepped forward.

Michael lurched in front of him. "I want you to leave it alone," he said unsteadily. He could feel Kevin's eyes on him. They were both going to think he was nutty.

"Come on, Michael," Jeremy wheedled. "Are you still upset about that stupid snake?" He looked past Michael and spoke to Kevin. "I put a plastic snake by his pillow and I guess it scared him so badly that—"

"It doesn't have anything to do with that stupid snake," Michael blurted out.

Jeremy tilted his head to one side. "What, then? The breath-holding contest? But you always lose. So why would you be—"

"Just stay away from the game," Michael managed. He couldn't explain, couldn't understand it himself. But he did not want Jeremy touching the game. A feeling of dread crept through him. His stomach tightened as Jeremy bent to pick up the beetle token.

"These are great. They look almost real except for the color," Jeremy said softly. "Where'd you get this game?" He looked up at Michael.

Michael swallowed. "A garage sale. At the Creepy House."

Jeremy looked blank for few seconds, then understanding lit his face. "That old broken-down place on Foster Street?"

Kevin smiled. "Where that old woman lives—the one who can't stand kids?"

Jeremy was nodding. "I remember that place. We used to do all kinds of stupid stuff, trying to get her to come out and talk to us."

Kevin shrugged. "She probably can't stand kids because so many of them annoy her all the time. Do the little kids still do that?"

Jeremy shrugged. "I don't know. We sure did. I should probably go by there sometime and apologize. It'd be fun to talk to her now that I don't half-believe she's a witch or something."

Michael began to relax a little. Nothing bad was going to happen. Jeremy was even acting a little nicer than usual. And the board game was interesting. The tokens were amazingly real.

"This is neat," Jeremy was saying.

Michael watched his brother closely. If he was the one who had moved the game around, he was sure doing a great job of acting like he had never seen it.

"Let's play," Kevin suggested. "Are there instructions?"

Michael shook his head quickly, the knot in his stomach tightening again. "I don't think we should."

Kevin laughed. "Why?" Then he frowned. "You're right. We should swim now. We shouldn't let this side-track us."

"Can I take it into my room for a little while?" Jeremy asked.

Michael shook his head, "No! I . . . ah . . . I want to put it away now."

Jeremy tipped his head to one side. "You sure are acting weird. You were last night, too. What's wrong with you, Michael?"

"I just don't want you taking the game, that's all. I bought it. I don't want you to lose any of the pieces or anything and I—"

Jeremy's eyes went wide. "Lose pieces? There are only four tokens, Michael. Four tokens and these." He picked up the dice. He shook them in his hand, then cupped it to spill them out onto the board.

Time seemed to pause, so that each second passed slowly enough for Michael to see everything very clearly.

The dice fell from Jeremy's hand, turning as they tumbled downward. Michael stared in fascination as they struck the board.

The black one rolled straight ahead while the white one bounced at an angle. They stopped turning and settled into stillness: a five and a four. Michael looked up at Jeremy's face in time to see the terror in his eyes. Then he saw what had scared his brother and he felt his heart skip a beat.

They weren't in Michael's bedroom anymore. They were sitting on the ground, outdoors. There were trees towering above their heads. Michael looked up at the patches of sky that showed between the green limbs. Then he looked at Kevin and his brother. They both looked pale and faint. He stood up and felt a little dizzy.

"What happened?" Jeremy demanded.

Kevin shook his head. In fact, his whole body was shaking. He sat down on a fallen log, then jumped up, almost instantly. "Ouch!" He slapped at his legs. "It's some kind of little bug," he said, still brushing at his bare legs. "It bites."

"Where are we?" Jeremy asked. He was still staring at Michael.

"I don't know," Michael said quietly. His stomach was knotted so tightly that he almost couldn't breathe.

"This is kind of exciting," Jeremy said.

Kevin frowned.

Michael shook his head. "No it isn't. Something awful is going to happen."

Jeremy looked around. "Something awful already did. Where are we?" he repeated. "All I did was roll the dice and—"

A crashing sound erupted near them, so close and so loud that Michael had to cover his ears. All three boys turned to face the trees along one edge of their little clearing. A honking, rasping sound came out of the bushes.

"Run!" Kevin shrieked. He and Jeremy started off, sprinting toward the far side of the clearing. For a split second, Michael hung back, his eyes fixed on the bushes that hid whatever was making the terrible noise. He stepped back when the bushes began to sway, then finally, just as his nerve broke and he turned to follow the others, he caught a glimpse through the brush. He saw a single leg, as long as he was tall. And it was hairy, segmented, a dark brown, ending in a tip, not a foot. A tarantula's leg.

Michael ran hard, but at the edge of the clearing he tripped and fell, sprawling across the ground. He half rolled, looking back over his shoulder. The tarantula was lifting another of its legs over the bushes, precise in its motions, its odd, faceted eyes searching one direction, then another.

Michael scrambled up, his breath quick and shallow. How could there be a tarantula that big? Had they fallen into a nightmare? He got to his feet and ran again, glancing back over his shoulder. The tarantula saw him and crossed the

clearing, its head tilted as though it was curious, its hairy fangs as long as Michael's forearm.

"This way!"

Michael heard Jeremy screaming at him and veered toward a thick clump of the brush that dotted the ground under the tall trees. He glanced back over his shoulder. The tarantula was still coming.

"Here!"

Jeremy pulled him down, into the thicket.

"No," Michael panted. "It'll find us. It'll get us here."

"What will?" Kevin asked, his eyes round with fear. "What is it?"

Michael gestured. "A tarantula. As big as a truck. Come on. *Run!*"

They pounded out of the thicket. Michael saw his brother look back, saw his eyes go wide. Kevin looked back once, too, and nearly fell. Michael grabbed his arm and kept him on his feet.

"Faster," Jeremy shouted. "This way!"

They ran into thick brush. The twigs poked and scratched, tearing at their clothes and their skin, making it hard to keep going. He looked over his shoulder once. The tarantula was behind them, lifting each long leg delicately, its eyes glittering in the bands of sunlight.

Michael was still turned when the land fell away in front of him. He wrenched around, stumbling, his hands out in front of his face. He heard his brother yell, then Kevin, and knew they were falling too.

Michael hit the ground hard, his breath

whooshing out in a rush. He rolled over and sat up. The tarantula was making its way *over* what they had just run *through*. As Michael watched, his heart thudding painfully against his ribs, the huge tarantula picked its way from the top of one thicket to another.

Michael scrambled to his feet. Kevin was already standing. Jeremy got up, the side of his face scratched and bleeding. Michael glanced around, desperate. They had fallen into a creek. Behind them, a stream a few feet deep and about fifteen feet wide gurgled over rounded stones.

"Get across the water," Michael yelled. "Maybe it won't wade after us."

They splashed through the water. It was stinging cold, like a mountain creek early in the year when the snow is just melting. On the far bank, Michael turned to look.

The tarantula stood at the edge of the water, lifting one long thin leg, then another, staring at them. It was so huge, so awful, with its fangs covered with fine hairs, that Michael had to turn away, shuddering, his knees weak.

"It doesn't," Jeremy said between heaving breaths, "want to get wet!"

"Oh, no," Kevin groaned, nodding toward the tarantula. He was bent almost double, his hands on his thighs as he tried to catch his breath.

Michael turned back to see. His heart beat so hard that it almost hurt. The tarantula was reaching up to catch hold of a branch that grew out over the creek. It swung upward, each of its machine-like legs gripping the branch. The leaves

fluttered as the tarantula's weight made the branch shiver. It teetered back and forth, balancing as it walked the limb.

"Run!" Jeremy yelled.

Michael managed to stop staring and start running again. He scrambled along behind his brother and Kevin, glancing back over his shoulder every few seconds. He was the first one to realize that the tarantula had stopped. It hadn't come all the way across the creek.

"Jeremy! Kevin!" Michael yelled their names as loudly as he could, but it took him two more tries before they heard him. When they did, they slowed down, looking warily over their shoulders.

"It's still in the tree," Michael shouted.

Jeremy stumbled to a halt, Kevin beside him. They all stood close together, breathing hard. Michael's legs were trembling with fear and fatigue. As they watched, the tarantula dropped out of the tree on the far side of the creek and stalked away from them, back into the brush.

"Now what?" Jeremy's voice was shaking.

Kevin turned in a slow circle. "How did we get here?"

Michael shook his head. "The game, somehow," he said slowly. "It's like we dropped into one of the paintings on the board. But I don't know *how*. None of this makes sense."

"Look!" Kevin pointed and started walking. Michael followed. Jeremy brought up the rear.

"Wow," Jeremy said softly as Kevin stopped. Michael said nothing. He could hardly believe his eyes. Somehow, this was more frightening than

the tarantula had been. Because now he had to believe what he had been suspecting all along.

"This is nutty," Jeremy growled, sinking to his knees as they stared.

The game board was lying on the ground. The dice lay in the middle of it, slightly apart, with the numbers five and four showing. The tokens were arranged on different squares now, and there were three new ones—three small statuettes of boys running huddled together on one square. The painting around them was of a forest, a creek running through it. The square they were on had a painted circle within it. The one just ahead of them was marked with a triangle.

Michael knelt to see better. One of the tokens looked like him. The other two looked like Jeremy and Kevin. Kevin looked up and met his eyes.

"It's us. How can it be *us?*" Kevin breathed.

Michael shook his head. None of it made any sense.

"The tarantula is missing," Jeremy said in a hoarse whisper. Michael stared at the board. he was right. The beetle, the scorpion and the centipede were still all on the board. What did that mean?

"So where is it?" Kevin said, looking up. They stood up and backed away from the board, glancing out over the trees.

"Do you think the big insects have something to do with the tokens?" Michael said, not really expecting anyone to answer him. "They must, right?"

"I think so," Jeremy breathed, turning in a slow circle. The forest around them seemed too silent, like it was waiting too, expecting something to happen. The quiet seemed to settle in, to surround them.

A tiny rustling sound in the dry leaves beneath the brush made them all jump.

"What was that?" Jeremy whispered.

Michael shook his head. "I don't know."

The rustle came again and Michael turned toward it, trying to locate its source. A tiny glint of silver caught his eye and he gasped. A second later he heard Kevin and Jeremy take in quick breaths and he knew they had seen it to.

Picking its way across the clearing delicately, as though it was in no hurry at all, the silver metal tarantula lifted its legs gracefully and carefully.

"That's the *token,*" Jeremy said flatly.

Michael could only nod. It was. Somehow a metal game token had come alive and was walking toward them. Nothing made sense anymore. As he thought about it, the tip of his index finger ached for a second, but the pain was gone so quickly that he wasn't sure if he had felt it or imagined it.

Michael watched in horror as the silver tarantula advanced. It moved like any tarantula would, its legs arched high, stepping over fallen leaves, climbing over twigs.

As it got close they all stepped back, watching, but it ignored them completely. It stepped back up onto the game board, paused, and appeared to look back and forth. Then it chose a square near the end of the game path and settled into a crouching position. It froze, holding the pose perfectly.

"What's it doing?" Jeremy whispered.

Michael shrugged. "Stop asking me questions like you expect me to know the answers."

"It's your stupid game," Jeremy accused. "You bought it from that weird old woman."

Michael shook his head. "So do you think she really is a witch or something?"

Jeremy shrugged. "Maybe she had no idea what the game was."

Michael frowned. "That doesn't make sense.

She said she wanted me to have it, that I should share it with you."

Jeremy's eyes narrowed. "She said that? You should have known something was weird. You should have warned me and—"

"About what?" Michael demanded. "She could have come right out and told me about the game and I wouldn't have believed her. No one would have. And besides, maybe she—"

"Maybe what?" Jeremy exploded.

Kevin stepped between them. "This isn't a good time to argue. We have to figure out what to do."

Michael nodded, forcing himself to calm down. "You're right. Okay, let's think. We ended up here after Jeremy rolled the dice. Or at least that's what it seemed like, didn't it? I keep thinking that the whole thing is a dream and I'm going to wake up any second now."

"Maybe," Kevin said uneasily. "Or maybe it isn't. It doesn't feel like a dream to me at all."

Michael was listening, but his eyes were on the tarantula. It was as still as any metal object should be now. Lifeless. His gaze turned to the three figurines of boys running. It was all too weird. He had to be dreaming.

"I wish I had on jeans instead of these swim trunks," Kevin said. He was running his hand down his leg, wincing.

Michael looked at the scratches running down his own calves. Jeans would have been much better. "We didn't know we'd be on a camping trip." he joked half-heartedly. No one laughed.

"I just want to go home and swim, like we were

supposed to be doing," Kevin said. His voice was whiny and shaking, like a little kid's. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm pretty scared."

"Who wouldn't be?" Jeremy said angrily. "Here we are in this forest with a giant tarantula chasing us and then . . ."

Michael glanced up at his brother. Jeremy had picked up the dice and was rubbing them between his palms. Michael could hear them clicking against each other.

"Since all this happened when I rolled the dice the first time," Jeremy said slowly, "I wonder what would happen if I rolled the dice again?"

"Don't," Michael said.

"I mean," Jeremy went right on, "we are already *here* aren't we? So what else could the game do to us that would be so awful?"

Kevin was shaking his head. "Jeremy, why don't we think about it for awhile and—"

"Think about what?" Jeremy demanded. "Do you really think there is a door somewhere here labeled 'Exit'? I am beginning to think that I'm dreaming anyway—that the two of you aren't really here at all."

"We don't know what's here and what isn't," Michael pleaded. "We don't know anything about anything, do we? Why don't you just set the dice down?"

"I don't want to," Jeremy responded. He rubbed the dice a little faster between his palms. "I think we should just see what happens next." Before Michael could do or say anything else, Jeremy

rattled the dice in one hand, then tossed them onto the board.

The game board disappeared, and an instant later there was a terrible grinding sound off to their right, where the creek ran clear and cold. All three boys turned to face the awful sound.

"You always have to be the one to act brave," Kevin shouted at Jeremy. "You always have to act smarter than everyone else—no matter how much trouble it causes."

Michael glanced at his brother's face. Jeremy was frowning, but it was impossible to tell whether he had heard what Kevin said, or if he was reacting to the grating din that rose from the trees.

"Look!" Kevin shouted. He pointed upward at an angle.

Michael saw something moving in the treetops thirty feet above their heads. He watched as an enormous black shape sorted itself out of the green canopy.

A shiny black shell encased the giant beetle. Its antennae were six or seven feet long and they twitched back and forth, feeling the way.

"How could anything be that big?" Kevin breathed. "It's a bug. A *bug*. Bugs are supposed to be *small*."

The beetle looked down and rubbed its antennae together. The roaring, grating sound rose again. Then the beetle raised its head and Michael could see it opening and closing its jagged mandibles. The sound was like a chipper—one

of those machines that people use to grind up pruned branches.

"Here it comes," Kevin wailed. "It sees us."

"Run!" Michael yelled as he turned and sprinted after him. He heard his brother screaming something at the beetle, and he glanced back. After a second or two, Jeremy followed them.

Michael ran as fast as he could, but every time he looked back, the beetle was still coming through the tree tops. It worked its way from one branch to another, staying high off the ground, but definitely following them.

The beetle didn't look like it was hurrying, but it kept up, raising its head once in awhile to grind its mandibles back and forth. It was an awful sound, like crunching bones. Michael ran faster, though it soon hurt to breathe.

The countryside changed around them as they went. The huge canopy trees slowly gave way to smaller ones that grew a little farther apart. Michael could see the sky in patches where the trees thinned.

Then the small trees got farther and farther apart. At first, Michael was glad. It was much easier to run across the open ground. But then he glanced back and realized that the giant beetle was having more and more trouble crossing from one tree to the next and was looking down at the ground.

Michael looked ahead again, trying to figure out what they could do. He didn't know about Kevin or his brother, but he was sure that he couldn't run very much farther.

"He's coming after us!" Kevin screamed.

Michael looked back. It was true. The beetle was coming down the last tree. When it hit the ground, it headed toward them, clacking its shiny black jaws and hissing.

"Run!" Kevin screamed again. "Run!"

Michael tried to force his exhausted legs to go a little faster, but it was almost impossible. To make everything worse, the ground was rising a little. It wasn't exactly a hill, but it was enough of a slope to make running harder. As they climbed the rise, Michael glanced back.

The beetle was still coming toward them. It was getting closer. Michael could see the sharp edges of the mandibles now. They were like jagged black knives. He turned back and staggered onward. At the top, he saw another creek. There were no trees here. Would the beetle wade across to chase them?

As Michael forced himself to keep running, to keep picking up one cement-heavy foot, then the other, he looked at his brother and Kevin. Kevin looked completely exhausted. His head was down, his feet barely clearing the ground. Jeremy was still running pretty fast, his head up. Michael glanced back around at the beetle. It was really close now, less than twenty feet behind them, its antennae whipping back and forth.

"Get across the river, Kevin," Michael shouted. He had to wait for three more painful breaths before he could finish. "Maybe he won't wade. Just make it across the river."

Kevin half turned toward him and stumbled,

crashing to his knees. While Michael watched in horror, the beetle rushed toward Kevin, as if it had just been waiting for one of them to fall.

"Get up," Michael yelled.

The beetle kept coming, the feathery antennae sweeping the ground, back and forth, while the black legs pumped up and down. Kevin was struggling to his feet when the beetle reached him. It flicked out a long shiny foreleg and knocked him back down. Kevin screamed.

Michael veered to one side, coming to a stop. Jeremy pounded onward. Kevin was yelling and thrashing, as the beetle held him in its stick-like forelegs. As Michael watched, gasping in one long breath after another, the beetle picked Kevin up and held him out, as if he was looking him over.

"No," Michael shouted. Without thinking, he ran straight at the beetle. Kevin was really shrieking now. Michael got up as much speed as he could, slamming into the beetle's front legs. They felt hard, almost like brittle plastic.

The beetle stumbled to one side, knocked off balance. in that instant, it dropped Kevin. Michael grabbed his friend's hand and jerked him to his feet.

Half running, half carrying Kevin, Michael struggled away from the beetle. It turned, sweeping the air with its impossibly long antennae. Michael kept going, dragging Kevin until he could run on his own. Together they made it down the slope and splashed into the creek.

Michael gasped. The water was ice-cold again. He slipped a little. There were big, rounded rocks on the bottom, slick and invisible beneath the current-rippled surface. He slid again, his hands spread out wide for balance.

"Hurry!" It was Jeremy on the far side.

Kevin slipped and went down sideways, his head going under the water for a second. He came up spluttering and Michael grabbed his shoulders, helping him stay upright.

"Come on," Jeremy yelled. "He's going to come into the water, I think."

Michael glanced back. The beetle was pacing the water's edge, its antennae raking back and forth. Its mandibles were going so fast that the sound was like a cement mixer now.

Michael looked up at his brother. Jeremy was dancing along the water's edge. "Hurry up! Come on, Michael! Kevin! Come on!"

Michael stopped in the shallows, turning back to help Kevin. The beetle was still pacing on the far side, searching frantically for a way to cross without touching the water. As Michael watched, it raised its head and hissed—a sound like air brakes on a train. It hurt his ears.

Kevin grabbed Michael's arm and together they waded out. Michael glanced back once more. The beetle was still pacing, but they couldn't be sure that it wouldn't wade in at any second.

"Thanks," Kevin gasped. "I think it was going to eat me or something." He touched the side of his face and for the first time, Michael saw a rivulet of blood where the sharp thorny spikes on

the beetle's legs had cut Kevin while he struggled with the giant insect.

They topped the creek bank and started off across the flat, grassy country, walking fast, but not running. Michael was pretty sure that he couldn't run. He scanned the horizon. He could see more trees in the distance—but none close by. And it looked like the bushes thinned out into a desert farther ahead. Then he glanced back.

The way the land lay, he could no longer see the creek, or the giant beetle. If it came, and he was afraid it might—the creek really wasn't very deep—it would just suddenly pop up over the hill. Michael faced front again, trying to walk a little faster.

"What do you think we should do?" he asked Kevin.

Kevin could only shrug, dragging in one long breath after another. Jeremy was in front as before, glancing back every few seconds. They all kept looking backward. But the beetle didn't appear.

"Look! The game board!" Jeremy yelled. He pointed and veered off to one side. Michael and Kevin followed him.

"Oh, no," Kevin said. "Don't touch it, Jeremy. Just leave it alone."

"I think we have to play," Jeremy said.

Kevin groaned. "I don't want to play. I want to go home."

"If you can figure out how to do that, I'll come with you," Jeremy said.

Michael knelt beside the board, glancing up every few seconds and looking toward the creek.

"Look at this," Jeremy said.

Michael tried to focus on the board. It was hard. His heart was still slamming against his ribs, his legs were shaky—and the grinding sound of the beetle's knife-like mandible was still loud enough to hear, even at a distance.

"Look," Jeremy insisted. "It's the same, except this time it's the beetle that's missing."

Michael saw what his brother was talking about. The three running boys were on another square that had a circle drawn inside it. The centipede was on the next square, standing inside a triangle. The scorpion and the tarantula were on other squares, silvery, motionless. But the beetle wasn't there. Michael looked in the sandy soil around the board, but it was nowhere to be seen.

The sound of the beetle's mandibles stopped abruptly. They all stood up and faced the hill that led down to the creek. The silence stretched out and filled the air around them. It almost seemed louder than the noise had seemed.

"What do you think that means?" Kevin asked. His breathing had steadied a little.

"I don't know," Jeremy answered, "but I doubt if it's a good sign."

Michael watched the bank, his heart speeding up again. The beetle had hurt Kevin. Would it eat them if it got the chance? It had looked like it was about to wade into the cold water. He tried to remember if he had ever seen a beetle swim before. He didn't think he had. But did that mat-

ter here? Were the giant insects like the small ones he was familiar with?

"This has to be a dream," Kevin said slowly. "It has to be." He reached up to touch the cut on the side of his face again and winced. "I hope it is."

Jeremy stood up and turned to face the hill. "Maybe one of us should go back and look. If the beetle is coming, it'd be better if we had a head start."

"If it is coming, I'm going to be in trouble," Kevin said in a weak, breathless voice. "I don't think I can run another step."

Michael looked down at the game board. "There were rules in the box. I read them once, but I can't really remember what they said."

"You should try," Kevin said. "Maybe then we could figure out—"

"I thought this was a dream too," Jeremy said, turning to face them. He shook his head. "But now I don't think it is. I think if we're ever going to get home, we're going to have to finish playing."

"It said something like that," Michael said, wishing he could recall the exact wording of the rules. "It said you had to play until the last person was finished—something like that."

"I'm finished now," Kevin said. His voice was loud, and a little shrill. "I never wanted to play this stupid game. And I want to go home."

"We will as soon as we can," Michael said. He tried to keep his voice even and calm. It was impossible. But at least he didn't sound as panicked

as Kevin. He looked at the hill again. Why had the beetle stopped making its noise? Was it coming across the water? Maybe it would drown. "It's still possible I'm just dreaming," he murmured to himself, even though he didn't really believe it anymore.

"I'm going to go look," Jeremy said. "And this isn't a dream, Michael. We're going to have to figure out how to get home."

Michael nodded slowly. As much as he hated to admit that this was all real, he knew Jeremy was right. "I'll try to remember the rules. There were only four. And one said something about having to play it all the way through."

Jeremy walked away, his eyes fixed on the rise. Michael watched him go, then turned to Kevin. Kevin's face was pale and he looked like he was about to start crying. "Look at the game board," Michael said, to distract him. "See if you can think of something."

Kevin shook his head. "I don't want to have to think. I just want to—"

"Go home," Michael finished for him. "But we don't know how to do that yet. So just try to—"

"Hey, look at this!" Jeremy yelled. "Hey, Michael! It's coming."

For a second, Michael's stomach clenched. But the hill remained empty. There was no giant beetle with gnashing mandibles and sweeping antennae. For a few more seconds, he waited, his heart thudding. He glanced at Kevin. Kevin's face had gone dead white. Michael looked back at Jeremy.

"Look!" his brother yelled again. He pointed toward the ground.

Finally, Michael saw the tiny glint of silver. He was so relieved that he felt a wave of weakness go through his legs. Kevin laughed—a cracked, weird-sounding laugh.

"It's little and silver again," Jeremy shouted. He was walking along slowly, still pointing.

Michael saw the beetle picking its way over the broken ground the way the tarantula had—like an normal insect. It came steadily, its legs busily bending and straightening.

As Michael stared, the beetle made its way slowly back to the game board. Then, just as the tarantula had done, it climbed up onto the board and walked to the square where the tarantula already rested.

Kevin was bent over the board, staring at the beetle. Michael came to stand beside him. The beetle looked around for a second, tilting its head to glare up at them. Then it froze in place as the tarantula had done. It faced front and its legs stopped moving. A second later it was silver, lifeless metal.

"That's impossible," Kevin breathed. He looked up, a horrified expression on his face. He whirled around, his eyes wide, fixed on Michael's. "I can't understand any of this," he wailed, gesturing down at the board. "You act like all this is normal or something. Like I should just believe that all this nutty stuff could *happen.*" He stumbled backward, losing his balance. As he fell, Michael

seemed to see things in slow motion again, just as he had when Jeremy rolled the dice.

Only this time, Kevin didn't mean to roll them. It just happened because he was flailing his arm to catch his balance and he bumped the dice. It didn't seem to matter though. The dice jumped up, then came down, turning over once or twice apiece.

The game board blurred, then it disappeared. Then the air was filled with a sound that made Michael's heart slam back into high gear. He turned, with Kevin and Jeremy, and faced the direction the noise was coming from.

II

This time the sound was like a thousand distant drummers. A pounding vibration came through the ground. Michael stood, trying not to panic. It was hard. The earth itself seemed to be trembling. Jeremy stood a little way off, his head tilted to one side. Michael put his fingers in his ears. It didn't help much. It seemed like the sound was coming in through his *skin.*

"Where is it coming from?" Kevin screamed. "Where should we run? Where—"

His last words were cut short as the vibration increased to a deafening thrum. Michael turned in a circle. It seemed—it *felt*—like the sound was coming from the ground. But where?

"We should run. We should just run now!"

It was Kevin's shout that made Michael spin around in time to see Jeremy leap backward. Michael stared, his scalp prickling with sweat and fear. The vibration was so strong now that the dirt was churning. Dust rose as it increased, the rocks dancing across the soil surface. Then, sud-

denly, the ground opened and a huge, ugly head emerged. It was rounded, hard and shiny—there was no doubt at all that it belonged to another giant insect. Its greenish-brown skin was slick. It opened its mouth and Michael saw weird blackish shapes inside it. Teeth? Did insects have teeth?

"Run!"

This time it was Jeremy yelling and Michael glanced at him. Of course. Of course they should run. But where?

"This way," Jeremy shouted as though he could hear Michael's thoughts. Kevin started toward him immediately, sprinting. Michael hesitated a second longer. The massive curved head of the insect was rising a little now, and Michael saw the quick motion of two legs. Then four. Then six. It was the centipede.

"Run," Jeremy yelled back over his shoulder as he took off.

This time, Michael's body responded without conscious thought. He began to run after his brother and Kevin, following a few steps behind as they raced away from the emerging centipede.

The land was flatter here. Michael ran as fast as he could—it was getting harder. As scared as he was, his legs were incredibly tired. He came over a little hill and saw, off to their left, some rougher ground. There were rocks, some of them as big as houses.

"This way," Michael yelled, heading toward the rocky place. They would be able to scramble over rocks better than something that had a hundred

legs to organize, he was sure. "To the rocks," he shouted at Kevin, pointing when his friend glanced at him. Kevin nodded and veered. Together they started toward the rockier ground. Just at the edge of it, where the rocks were scattered thinly across the terrain, Jeremy started shouting.

"Get up here. Get back up here!"

He sounded so frantic that Michael automatically angled back toward him. "It'll be harder for the centipede down there," Michael argued.

Jeremy shook his head. "Stay up here. We can go faster."

"No," Michael argued, his breathing quick and almost painful. He glanced back over his shoulder. The centipede was still coming out of its crack in the ground. But unless it was as long as a freight train, it would start coming after them soon. As if it had seen him looking, it hissed, raising its head and its first three or four pairs of legs. They wriggled, horribly pocked with sharp black spines that arched out from its shiny, brown-green skin.

Michael stumbled and faced forward, running a few awkward steps to catch his balance. Then he looked back again. He kept glancing over his shoulder, watching the centipede as it freed itself from the ground.

"Here it comes," Kevin shrieked.

Michael watched the centipede straighten its long body, turning in a tight loop. Its legs rippled along its sides, raising a fine dust as it moved. Then Michael saw its pincers and nearly stum-

bled. They looked like the blades of some kind of weird, brown-green machine. They were at least three feet long.

"Did you see that?" Jeremy rasped.

"Yes," Michael managed. He looked across at Kevin. He was keeping up, but he looked so pale and scared that Michael felt sorry for him.

Michael glanced back once more. The centipede was coming fast now, following their path. Its pincers were raised high above its rear end, swinging back and forth like a razor-sharp scythe. It seemed to be following their tracks rather than chasing them. It veered where they had when Michael had wanted to go toward the rocks, then straightened again. As he watched, it came across the rocky area, slowing down to maneuver itself through the rocks.

"Look," Michael shouted at his brother. "Look at how hard the rocks are for it. We should—"

"Just run faster, Michael," Jeremy interrupted. They were all breathing so hard that their words came out in little bursts at the top of each breath.

"It sees us," Kevin panted.

Michael turned back. The centipede was coming faster. Its spiny front legs were nearly a blur. The row of legs along its sides rippled in and out like an ugly curtain in the wind. It curved around another rock, slowing down to do it.

"See that?" Michael demanded.

This time, Jeremy nodded at him. "Okay. Okay, let's go then."

Michael ran toward the rocks, turning hard. He could hear the other two behind him as he

ran, his weary legs and aching lungs slowing him almost to a jog. But above everything, he could hear the odd, vibrating sound of the centipede's legs hitting the ground as it came after them.

"This way," Jeremy called out, bending their path even harder to the left now that he was convinced.

Michael staggered into the rocks, slowing down even more. He was sure that the rough going would slow the centipede—but they had to keep going. He ran as carefully as he could, skirting the worst of the rock, zig-zagging his way across the ground. He was afraid to look back, sure he would fall if he did. The rocks were jagged and close together.

They made it to the top of a little rise and Kevin stumbled to a stop. "I can't go any farther," he said between breaths. "I can't."

Michael stopped beside him, then turned to look back. The centipede was still coming toward them, but it had slowed down a lot. It had to wind through the big rocks, and the smaller ones made it lift its legs in quick jerking motions, one after the other.

"At least we can rest for a minute," Jeremy said from where he had halted, a little ahead of Michael and Kevin.

Michael nodded. He scanned the horizon, turning in a circle, hoping that the rocks covered a big area. In the distance he could see a line of trees. Was there a stream there? He glanced at his brother. "Jeremy?"

"What?" Jeremy faced him, glancing back at the centipede every few seconds.

"Every time we cross a creek we find the playing board and the bug turns back into a silver token."

Kevin blinked. "Hey. That's right."

Jeremy pointed and Michael turned to look. The centipede was getting closer. It was still having trouble moving through the rocks, but it wasn't giving up. Michael looked toward the horizon. "There are trees up there."

Jeremy squinted and Kevin shaded his eyes. "Maybe a creek," Jeremy said.

Michael nodded. "That's what I thought. But we should stay in the rocks as long as we can."

"Let's go, then," Kevin said, glancing nervously at the centipede. "We shouldn't let it get too close."

"It can't do anything to us from there," Jeremy assured him. But at that instant the centipede reared back its head and spit at them. Some of the sticky gunk hit Jeremy and he reeled backward, crying out.

12

Jeremy managed to run. Michael saw him using his shirt to rub his cheek as they fled, cleaning the centipede's spit off as well as he could without stopping.

"Are you all right?" Michael yelled at his brother.

Jeremy nodded. "I think so. It hurts pretty bad but it missed my eye."

Michael glanced back at the centipede. They were staying ahead of it, but not by much. Michael remembered reading something about centipedes that spit poison to stun their prey. How far could it spit? Michael speeded up a little, but even though he had caught his breath, his legs were still pretty tired. He stumbled on a rock and barely managed to keep from falling down. He felt Kevin's hand on his arm, steadying him. Once he had his balance back he turned to Kevin and thanked him.

"I'm sorry I got so weird," Kevin said as they went on. "I just couldn't believe this was real."

He took two big breaths, then looked at Michael again. "I guess it has to be, huh?"

Michael looked at Kevin. "I think it is. I wish it wasn't," he added. They went around a big boulder.

Kevin half smiled when he glanced at Michael again. "We can make the tree line if we're careful and no one falls down or anything."

Michael looked at the trees. They had gotten a little closer. "I only hope there's a creek there.

Kevin tried to smile again. "There has to be."

Michael nodded, but he didn't believe it. There didn't *have* to be anything here. He didn't say it out loud because Kevin was finally pulling himself together—why make him terrified again? And what else could they do besides run from the centipede, anyway? He looked back at the centipede. It was snaking its way through the rocks, curving its body around one way, then the other. As Michael watched, it lifted its head and spit again. The awful stuff spattered on the ground just behind Kevin. Kevin yelped and speeded up. Michael tried to increase his pace, too.

Michael kept going, lifting his leaden legs over and over, trying to stay far enough ahead of the centipede to escape the range of its foul-smelling spittle. It did not spit often—it seemed preoccupied with just getting over and around the rocks. Michael stumbled several times as his foot rolled on a fist-sized stone. But he managed to keep from falling—and he kept running.

As they went, Michael could see that one side of Jeremy's face was turning an angry red, like

the kind of sunburn that's going to blister. Michael kept glancing at his brother. Once they got to the creek, Jeremy could wash his face, rinse away whatever poison the centipede had spit.

The tree line slowly got closer. Michael could see now that they were big trees with thick, spreading branches. He could also see the smooth stretch of ground they would have to cross to get to them. Jeremy was a little ahead and when he turned, Michael knew he had seen it, too.

"We have to run faster through there," Michael turned to tell Kevin, pointing. Kevin rolled his eyes and groaned, but he didn't seem to panic.

"I can see a creek," Jeremy sang out. Michael felt a weight lift from his heart. If there was water, and if what they thought was true, they were probably going to be all right. They would find the game board somewhere on the other side and the centipede would get changed back into a little silver game token somehow, once they had crossed. He glanced sidelong at Jeremy. The side of his face was so red it almost looked like it was bleeding.

"You have to wash that gunk off your skin," Michael shouted as they left the rocks and ran onto the smooth ground. Jeremy nodded without turning.

Michael kept an eye on Kevin as they ran. They had hit the level ground well ahead of the centipede and at first, Michael thought it wouldn't be too hard to stay ahead of it until they reached the creek. But when the centipede came out of the rocks it seemed to double its speed. The

ground began to vibrate again with the rhythm of its legs.

"Hurry!" Michael yelled.

"I'm trying," Kevin shouted back.

"This way!" Jeremy took a slanting route, aiming for a space between two of the tallest trees. The centipede followed them, gaining ground with every second.

Michael felt a glob of the centipede's spittle hit his back. It stung. He forced himself to run faster, glancing at Kevin every few seconds to make sure that he didn't fall behind—or fall down.

Jeremy shrieked out a victory cry as he ran into the water. This was more than a creek. It was a river, three times as wide as the others had been. Michael ran straight in, afraid to look behind himself. The current dragged at him, slowing his steps until he was barely running at all, just slogging heavily through almost waist-deep water.

Michael glanced back over his shoulder. Kevin was a half pace behind him. Jeremy was off to one side, a little ahead. The centipede was approaching the water as fast as it could. Michael held his breath as it came on. For a moment, it looked as though the centipede would rush into the current, but it didn't. It slid to a stop just at the edge of the water, raising an incredible cloud of dust as it lumbered to a halt.

Michael turned to grin at Jeremy—just in time to see his brother step off into deep water. Startled, Jeremy sputtered, then began to swim.

"Let's go downstream," he called back to Michael. Michael nodded and waved.

"Kevin!" Michael called, turning. When Kevin glanced away from the centipede to look at him, he pointed at Jeremy, swimming. "It gets deep. Let's go."

Kevin nodded and Michael looked back at the centipede. It was rearing up now, the first three or four pairs of legs wriggling in the air, its pincers raised like swords. Michael slowed his step a little; when he hit the deeper water he pushed off a little, swimming strongly, not far behind his brother. He turned back once to make sure that Kevin was safely into the current, then he concentrated on keeping up with Jeremy.

When Jeremy finally decided to head for the far bank, Michael was grateful. It felt wonderful to swim like this, letting the swift current do all the work, getting farther and farther away from the centipede—but the water was pretty cold. Wading out, Michael shivered, wishing for a towel. He stood on the bank, rivulets running down the backs of his legs. He shook like a dog, watching the droplets arc out from his hair.

Kevin was shivering, too. "That was cl-cl-close," he said as they walked up the bank.

Michael was looking around for the game board. He had no idea how it had known where to appear before, but he wasn't surprised when he spotted it. He pointed and they all started walking toward it.

"It'll take a week for that centipede to get here now," Jeremy laughed. "Once it's small again, I

mean. We must have come a mile or more downstream." The red mark on his cheek was fading.

Michael was silent, thinking. Maybe it hadn't been so smart to get this far away from the centipede. "Do you think we'll have to wait here for it?"

"I wonder," Kevin put in. "What would happen if we just rolled the dice before it got back?"

Jeremy walked to the board and knelt beside it. "Jeremy, wait," Michael said quickly. "Just wait a few minutes until we warm up." Michael glanced up at the sky. The sun was still high. How long had they been here? What would they do when it got dark?

"Aw, Jeremy, don't." Kevin's voice was weary. Michael looked back at his brother.

Jeremy had picked up the dice, but he set them down again, very carefully. Nothing happened. "All right," Jeremy said, standing up. "We'll rest a little while."

"We should wait for the centipede to get here," Kevin said hesitantly. "I mean, it's supposed to come. Maybe we won't be able to go home until all the tokens are back or something."

Michael shrugged. "It's possible. The rules said something about finishing."

"What else did the rules say?" Jeremy asked. "Tell us now. Maybe you can think while there are no giant insects breathing down our necks."

Michael frowned, trying to remember. "I barely paid attention while I was reading them. I remember being disappointed. I thought they were playing instructions and they were more like care

instructions for the board and . . .” He trailed off, thinking about how the game had seemed to appear and disappear in his room. He should have known that something weird was going on. But he would never have suspected that the game was like *this*. He remembered the strange way the old woman had insisted he buy it.

Michael looked at Jeremy. “There was something about not moving the board during a game, and about finishing. Besides that, it just said you were supposed to be careful with the game, I think. Something about . . .” he trailed off again. “Like not getting the board wet or something. I can’t remember anything else.”

“Maybe we should get it wet,” Jeremy said. “Maybe we should throw it in the river.”

“But if you lose the dice we can’t finish and then maybe we’ll be stuck here,” Michael said cautiously.

“Look!” Kevin shouted.

Michael spun around. Kevin was pointing back toward the river. Michael ran to look down the bank. Coming toward them, its tiny silver legs rippling, was the centipede token.

They all stared as the centipede took its place on the board next to the other tokens, freezing into solid metal as they bent over it, watching.

"The scorpion is the only one left. If we get past it, then across a river or a creek somewhere, we win." Jeremy was talking fast, his voice eager, hopeful. "That's the way it works, doesn't it? It has to."

Michael nodded slowly, looking at the board. The landscapes kept changing. He tried to spot a river, but couldn't see one except for the one they had just crossed. The board looked like it had that time in his room—all desert and rock. "It seems like it works that way, Jeremy. But—"

"But nothing," Jeremy interrupted. "All we have to do is roll the dice, get past the scorpion and—"

"I'm too tired to run anywhere," Kevin said flatly. "I wish we could just go that way . . ." He pointed back toward the river. "Swim back across and be done with all this."

Michael nodded, thoughtfully. Jeremy turned to face the river. "There was nothing in the rules about going backwards?"

Michael shook his head. "Not in what I read. But maybe there were more rules that got lost or something. Or maybe the old woman took them out."

Jeremy shrugged. "I think we should try it. Maybe that's the way to win—you have to be smart enough to do what isn't expected of you."

Michael glanced at the board. The three boy figurines were on a new square, but they were still all together, little statuettes running side by side. Something tickled at Michael's memory. "The rules said you had to keep rolling the dice until the last player was finished," he said slowly. "But that doesn't make much sense if they all move at once. It's not like we're competing or something."

Jeremy turned. "Maybe we're supposed to."

Kevin groaned. "I hope not. Because you'll make sure you win no matter what and then Michael and I will get stranded here forever."

Jeremy acted like he hadn't even heard what Kevin had said. He bent again to stare at the board. Michael walked closer, recognizing the expression on his brother's face. It was the same intense look he got when they played chess or checkers, or any game.

"Once the game is over, it would be over," Jeremy muttered. "It wouldn't matter who won—it never does, really, not like that. So if anyone

wins, that's good—it just means we can all quit and go home, right?"

"I don't know, Jeremy," Michael said cautiously. He stared at the board. "There was something about not moving the board or the tokens while a game was going on, too," he said, thinking out loud. "There were four rules."

Jeremy looked up, ticking off four fingers as he spoke. "Something about not getting it wet. That's one. Then something about finishing. That's two. Don't move the board. That's three. What was the fourth?"

Michael tried to remember. "I don't know. Maybe being careful with the tokens, something like that."

Jeremy looked back at the board. "You're right. It sounds more like instructions for taking care of the game."

"It's amazing how these turn back into metal," Kevin said, reaching out toward the tarantula token. The moment he picked it up, the little silver tarantula turned and reared back on its hind legs.

Michael gasped. Without thinking, he slapped at Kevin's wrist. The tarantula fell back to the board, walked to its place, and froze into position again.

Michael stared at the tip of his index finger. Had it been one of the tokens that had stung him that first time he had reached into the case?

Jeremy picked up a slender stick and poked at the tarantula. It skidded across the board, lifeless, a silver game token, nothing more. Jeremy

levered the stick beneath the tarantula, lifting half its legs off the board. It fell back down, still not moving. Jeremy threw the stick aside and reached toward the tarantula.

"Don't!" Michael warned.

"If it tries to bite me, I'll mash it flat," Jeremy snapped. He closed his fingers around the tarantula's abdomen and lifted it.

The token came to life the instant it was solidly in Jeremy's hand. It squirmed and struggled, trying to twist around to bite him. Its thin silver legs churned. Jeremy held it out at arm's length, an expression of disgust on his face.

"Ow," Jeremy yelled suddenly. He flipped the tarantula sideways and it hit Michael's cheek and rolled downward.

Michael felt a sudden stab of pain along his jaw. He swatted at the tarantula, but it had already fallen. It hit the ground with a plop and ran onto his shoe. He kicked to get it off, but it clung. He kicked again—and hit the edge of the game board. Everything was jarred as the tarantula sailed off his shoe and up into the air. The dice and the tokens were tossed upward a few inches.

Michael jumped back from the board, stumbling. He saw the dice bounce. Only one of them turned over. But it was enough.

The air around Michael seemed to become electric, strange. The game board seemed to melt, whooshing away like the last image of a bad dream.

A clacking sound arose. The scorpion came

walking up out of the trees. It had claws like a lobster's, except that each one was nearly two feet long. Michael gasped. The claws looked big enough to pick up a person. Its tail was incredibly long, the curving segments arching into a half spiral just above the poison sack. The stinger was like a knitting needle, long and wicked looking.

Michael was shaking. He shifted from one foot to the other, trying to think. If they just started off across the open ground, they might be too tired to get away this time. And the scorpion probably wouldn't be slowed down by rocks, or anything else. As he watched, the scorpion scrambled up the slope toward them, its claws clacking open and shut, its stinger raised high over its back.

"Let's go back across," Jeremy was yelling. He started to run, heading downstream at an angle that would bring him back to the water's edge below the scorpion.

Michael remembered the game board—with the rocky desert painted from one corner to the other—and nodded, making a sudden decision. "Kevin," he yelled. "Kevin, this way!"

Kevin turned at the sound of his name. His eyes were huge with terror, his skin chalky white.

"This way," Michael yelled again. Kevin nodded and stumbled toward him. When he was close enough, Michael grabbed his arm and dragged him along, following the river bank a little ways behind Jeremy. The scorpion turned

to come after them, moving incredibly fast for its size.

"Just get across," Michael shouted at his brother. Jeremy shouted a response he couldn't understand, still running downstream along the bank.

"I can't go any farther," Kevin wailed, struggling to free himself from Michael's grasp.

"Come on," Michael pleaded. "Just a little farther. Just down to the water."

The clacking of the scorpion's claws was getting louder. Michael turned to look and jerked Kevin forward just in time. The huge claw clacked shut on empty air as Michael hauled Kevin out of the way. Kevin was so scared that he managed to speed up for a dozen strides, but then he started to falter again. Michael glanced up. Jeremy was a little ways ahead of them, still on the river bank. Michael wasn't sure why his brother wasn't going straight into the river, but he knew Kevin wouldn't last much longer.

"Let's swim, Kev," Michael shouted. Kevin nodded as he stumbled along. Michael glanced over his shoulder and saw the scorpion, less than twenty feet behind them. "You have to run in. Don't stop until you hit the deep part and the current takes you downstream."

Kevin nodded again, turning toward the water's edge. Michael let go of his arm and followed him, hoping that he wouldn't fall, wouldn't slow down too much. The clacking of the scorpion's claws were so close, so loud, that he was afraid to look.

Kevin hit the shallows and slowed down, lifting his feet high to slog through the water, going slower and slower as it got deeper. Michael glanced downstream and saw his brother still standing on the bank.

"Get in," Michael yelled at him.

Jeremy pointed across the water. Michael nodded. "Yes! Just get in and we'll cross." He concentrated on keeping his footing. The instant he saw Kevin fall forward in the water and begin to swim, he struck out himself, letting the current whoosh him away from the monstrous, clacking claws.

Michael rested in the water for a moment, barely keeping his head above the surface. He could see Kevin doing the same thing, not really stroking, just letting the current do the work. Then he glanced downstream.

Jeremy was still on the bank. But the scorpion had turned toward him now. As Michael and Kevin drifted past, Jeremy waved his arms over his head and pointed again. Automatically, Michael looked and instantly understood what his brother had been trying to tell him all along. The tarantula was on the other bank, as ugly and huge and awful as it had been the first time.

14

Michael's jaw was starting to ache where the game token tarantula had bitten him. He tried to ignore it and swam hard until he caught up with Kevin. "Look," he shouted and forced Kevin to turn around far enough to see the tarantula. Kevin made a funny little sound, then bobbled in the water and took in a mouthful. He coughed and spluttered.

"Swim," Michael commanded him. "Don't give up."

As they drifted past, Jeremy was edging toward the water. Then, as the scorpion got close, he made a sudden decision and ran into the shallows, arcing in a racer's dive once he was close enough to deep water to swim.

Jeremy stroked evenly, his form perfect, and caught up with them.

Michael glanced from one bank to the other. The scorpion was keeping up with them easily, snapping bushes off as it passed, moving like a brown, shiny tank. The tarantula was a little slower, but not much. And it was by far more

graceful. A fallen log delayed the scorpion for a few seconds. A slanting tree was no obstacle at all for the tarantula.

"What are we going to do?" Kevin demanded. His voice was shrill again. Michael was having a hard time controlling his own fear. How could they get out of the river now? Would they have to keep going until they were too exhausted to swim? There had to be a way.

"We have to figure something out," Jeremy yelled. He swam close, until he was bobbing in the water a few feet from Michael. "Think about those rules, Michael."

Angry, Michael turned himself in the water to face his brother. "If you hadn't picked up the tarantula, this wouldn't have happened. We might have been able to go straight across and we would be home right now."

Jeremy started to argue, but then he ducked his head. "I'm sorry. I know. I just got sick of being scared."

Michael's jaw was really starting to hurt. He touched it with his hand. Like his finger, there was a little swelling, but not much. "When they're little they can bite," he told Jeremy. "And it hurts pretty bad. I wonder what would happen if one of the big ones bit someone?"

Jeremy tipped his head, looking at Michael. "I don't want to think about it. I can see a red place. I'm sorry, Michael."

Michael looked at his brother. He hadn't ever heard him apologize twice in a row. Being scared out of his wits was good for Jeremy. Michael

splashed his brother a little, trying to smile, to forget for a few seconds that they were in terrible danger. Then he got an idea.

"What would happen if we splashed them?" he said aloud.

Jeremy looked puzzled for a second, then understanding lit his face. Even Kevin looked a little less pale. "It should work," Michael went on. "If they shrink when they have to cross a river, it would work with splashing too, if we can just get them wet enough."

"Which one?" Kevin asked.

Michael thought about it. His jaw was throbbing. "The tarantula. And if it works, we'll try it on the scorpion."

"Or maybe we should try it on them both at the same time," Jeremy said lifting himself in the water. "Then, if it works the game is over, right?"

Michael nodded slowly. "Maybe. It's worth a try anyway."

They decided that Jeremy would take on the scorpion while Michael and Kevin tried to get close enough to the tarantula to get it wet without getting close enough for it to hurt them.

"Good luck to us all," Kevin said as they separated in the water. He seemed to have calmed down again. Michael could only hope that he had.

Michael and Kevin swam side by side, not trying to go fast, just changing their course so that they were closer and closer to the bank where the tarantula ran along effortlessly, watching them.

"It's so big," Kevin said, turning to look at Michael.

Michael nodded, glancing back across the river at Jeremy. He was close to the scorpion, almost out of the deep water. Michael caught Kevin's eye. "Ready?"

Kevin nodded. "Let's go."

Michael ducked his head and began to stroke hard, almost straight toward the bank. After a moment, he lifted his head to see, and found Kevin waiting for him. "From here we have to wade."

Michael nodded. He could feel the bottom if he stretched. The tarantula had slowed when they had. Now it turned to face them, watching. Michael could see the long, hair-covered fangs jutting out from beneath its jaw. "Now!" Michael said. He stroked twice more, then planted his feet firmly on the bottom and shoved himself upright.

Michael clasped his hands, turning sideways like a baseball batter. He whacked at the surface of the water, driving a plume of spray at the bank. The water arced up, then fell, spattering the tarantula. It flinched as though it had been hit with acid. Michael forced himself closer to the bank, his heart thudding.

Kevin started straight-arming the water, pushing spouts toward the tarantula. Most of it fell short.

"Closer," Michael screamed. Kevin nodded and moved up.

The tarantula rose up on its legs, half turning.

"Get it," Michael yelled, beating at the water, sending big arcing sprays over the tarantula. It came down on its feet and surged toward them, its head back, the long fangs pointing almost straight at Michael's face.

Michael worked his arms like pistons, flinging water at the tarantula. Kevin seemed to have traded his fear for anger. He started shouting at the tarantula as they splashed, his voice shrill and furious.

The tarantula rose on its hind legs once more, and started toward them. Michael felt his stomach clench. But he refused to give up. This would work. It had to work.

The tarantula dropped back down onto its front pair of legs. It shook its head back and forth. Michael's arms were starting to ache, but he kept it up. He could see water streaming over the tarantula's back and running down its legs.

Suddenly, a thick white steam began to rise from the tarantula's body. When it cleared, Michael saw the tiny silver tarantula sitting on a rock, wiping at its face with one foreleg.

Michael whirled around. Jeremy was still throwing water at the scorpion, but the white mist was rising from it, too. As he watched, the scorpion shimmered and shrank. Jeremy threw back his head and howled—a cry of victory. He turned and saw Michael—and he put both fists over his head. Kevin started cheering.

"We did it, Michael. We won!" Jeremy shouted.

Michael grinned. Then he noticed an odd blurring in his vision. He blinked, then wiped at his eyes. The trees were getting misty, the rocks less jagged, the detail in the scene around him was fading. An instant later, they were back in his room.

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The game board was back on the floor. The four tokens were side by side once more, and the statuettes of the boys had disappeared.

Michael's swim trunks were dripping onto the floor. So were Kevin's and Jeremy's. They just stood for a minute or two, breathing hard, staring at each other and glancing down at the game board.

"I wonder if I can just throw it away?" Michael said, breaking the silence.

Kevin shook his head. "What if some little kids found it or something?"

Jeremy was frowning. "We could take it back to that Creepy House Witch and—"

"That's the last place we should take it," Kevin interrupted. "She'll just make sure that some other kids end up with it. We aren't the only ones she didn't like."

Michael nodded. Kevin was right. But what could they do with the game? He couldn't just keep it. "The tarantula was walking around in

my room before. Not silver. About this big." He held up his hand, his fingers spread out.

"So that's what you were talking about," Jeremy said. "After I put the snake in here."

Michael nodded. "I saw the tarantula first. I didn't understand about the plastic snake until you pointed it out to me."

"If they can come alive whenever they want, you can't keep the game here in your room."

Michael nodded. "I know."

"Do you think we could put it back in the case now?" Jeremy asked.

Michael shrugged. "I don't know." His jaw still hurt and he knew that it would for a few days, just as his finger had. "I'm afraid to pick them up."

Jeremy walked over to the board and peered down. He extended his hand, then drew it back. "I think the scorpion moved."

Michael went to stand beside the board, too. "Maybe we could use a broom or something to just sweep them into the case."

Kevin nodded approvingly. "That way no one has to touch them."

Michael stared at the tokens, wishing he knew how to destroy them, to make sure that no one would ever have to play the terrible game again. He noticed the case lying close by and picked it up. A piece of yellowed paper fell to the floor. It was the rules.

1) Protect from water.
2) Do not move game board or tokens during game.

3) Handle tokens carefully.
4) Roll dice until last player finishes.

"Here they are," Michael told Jeremy, handing him the brittle paper.

Jeremy read them, then handed them to Kevin. He stared at the paper, then raised his eyes. "They do hate water." He laughed.

Michael took the rules back from him. "I wonder why it says to protect it from water."

"Because water turns the big bad uglies back into little silver bugs," Jeremy said.

Michael shook his head. "But these are instructions that someone would read who hadn't played yet, right?"

"Michael, look out!"

Jeremy yelled and jumped back at the same moment. Michael looked at his brother.

"On your foot," Kevin was screaming. "They're on your foot!"

Michael looked down. All four tokens had climbed up onto his shoe and as he watched, his heart pounding, they kept coming. Jeremy started to swat at the tarantula, but his hand stopped midswing. "I don't think I can kill it like this. I tried to squeeze it last time and it wouldn't squash."

"Ouch," Michael said as the tarantula sank its tiny fangs into his leg. The ache started immediately. He saw the scorpion raise its tail and arch up, preparing to sink its stinger into his bare knee.

Michael started walking as fast as he could

without jostling the silver insects too much. He opened his door and turned to glance at Jeremy over his shoulder. "I have an idea. If Mom sees me, make sure you keep her out of the way."

Jeremy reached over to nudge Kevin and they followed Michael out into the hall.

Getting down the stairs was trickiest. The scorpion was still arching, threatening to sting him, glaring up at him with its tiny eyes. The centipede was still hanging onto his shoe, its legs tensed to keep hold. The beetle was waving its antenna, its head back. It leaned forward and Michael felt it bite into his skin. The pain burned like fire.

Michael gritted his teeth and forced himself to keep walking steadily and carefully. He didn't want to knock any of the bugs off his leg. He didn't want them to realize what he was doing until it was too late.

They got to the bottom of the stairs. Michael could hear his mother talking on the phone.

Jeremy shook his head. "It's like we never left. Maybe we weren't gone as long as we thought."

"Or maybe the game sends you back to the same time it was before you left."

Michael shook his head. Maybe he would be able to think about all that later. Right now, he had to get to the pool. "Open the sliding doors," he rasped to Jeremy. Jeremy nodded and ran ahead of him down the hall. With Kevin at his side, staring down at the silver insects that were working their way up his leg, Michael stepped out onto the patio.

The tarantula began walking faster. It came up Michael's trunks and climbed onto his shirttail. He clenched his hands into fists and kept walking. At the edge of the pool he took in three huge breaths, then a fourth. And he held it as he jumped in.

The cool water closed over Michael's head. He let himself sink all the way to the bottom. The water stung his eyes a little, but he kept them open.

The silver tarantula froze in its tracks. The scorpion turned in a slow circle, then drove its stinger downward. Michael flinched, but the stinger sank into the cloth of his trunks and he felt nothing. He saw the centipede rear back its head again. A tiny cloud of dark liquid streamed out of its mouth. The beetle bent close to his thigh and bit him again.

Michael reached out to brush it off, but its feet were somehow anchored to his skin. He plucked at the centipede. It was clinging to his shin now. He flicked at the tarantula. He had to get them off. He had to get back to the surface and breathe. Michael looked up. He could see the sunlight and he longed to be in it.

Stop it, Michael told himself. That's why you always lose to Jeremy. Something makes you mad or scared or silly and you just give up. He pressed his lips together and relaxed. He could get air whenever he needed it. There was no hurry.

Michael let water slide through his hair as he leaned against the side of the pool. He watched

the silver insects on his leg. After trying to hurt him, they started slowly crawling upward. When the tarantula was on his shoulder, Michael saw a fine white mist start to rise from its body. He forced his aching lungs to wait.

The tarantula began to dissolve as he watched. The beetle and the centipede began to give off a white mist, too. The scorpion took a few seconds longer, but then the water began to affect it, as well.

As Michael watched, the insects dissolved. They turned milky and soft, then just fell apart, disappearing into the water. He waited until the last bits of the scorpion were gone, then pushed off and swam so hard for the surface that he burst out like a dolphin, blowing out his stale breath and sucking in good clean air. "They're gone," he gasped. "The water just made them come apart. They're completely gone."

"You were down there so long I was getting scared," Jeremy said as Michael swam to the side. "That was longer than we ever managed to stay down."

"It felt like twice as long," Michael agreed.

Jeremy frowned. "Yeah, it did. All right. You win."

Michael stared at him for a few seconds, not understanding. Then Jeremy started to grin and he got it. "You mean you'll count this time? I don't ever have to have another breath-holding contest—and you'll quit teasing me?"

Jeremy nodded. "You earned all that and more. I don't think I could have stayed calm enough to

hold my breath with those insects crawling on me like that."

Kevin walked over to the grass and sat down. "I think I need to rest after today's practice session. I only hope it built up my stamina better than twenty laps would have."

"It did," Michael assured him. "More like two hundred laps."

They all laughed. Michael looked up at the sky. It was sunny and warm and everything was going to be all right now.

DARE TO BE SCARED . . .

Was *Your Turn—to Scream!* a little too creepy-crawly for comfort? Then check out this preview of *The Curse of the Cheerleaders,* the new Avon Camelot Spinetingler coming in September 1997. You sure won't be cheering for these freakish pom-pom-wavers!

We arrived at the field for the football game. Carla opened the doors and we all jumped out. Mrs. Brett had brought pom-poms in the school colors for each of us, and we went running toward the front of the stands, yelling and waving our pom-poms in the air.

The teams were already warming up at opposite ends of the field. There were several parents sitting on the metal benches.

Well, at least we'll have someone to cheer to, I thought. I'd been at football games before where the cheerleaders were the only ones there. We just cheered to the players.

"Let's get started, girls," Carla called to us. "We need to let our team know we support them!"

"Right!" everyone cried.

We lined up, facing the parents from our school.

Then we spelled out Grafton.

The only person in the stands who paid any attention to us was a little girl with blonde hair.

We did one more cheer, then turned our attention to the field, where the game was about to start.

"Come on, Bobby!" Jeanna shouted.

"Come on, Joe!" Betsy shouted.

Bobby Maxwell was our kicker, and Joe Barber was holding the ball for him.

Bobby ran toward the ball and kicked it really high, but a player from Carlson grabbed it on the run and started toward our goal. He was bigger than our players, so it was easy for him to run past all of them. He scored a touchdown, then their kicker kicked an extra point, and all of a sudden it was 7-0.

"We need to cheer louder," Mandy said. "Maybe they can't hear us."

"They can hear us," I said. "The problem is that the Carlson team is bigger."

I looked over at Carla. She was pacing up and down the sidelines. She seemed really upset. Once in a while she'd look up at the sky. There was something about what was happening that was making me nervous.

All of a sudden, she said, "We're going to cheer the new cheer."

The rest of the girls looked at each other and nodded.

What was going on here? I wondered. I suddenly felt like I wasn't part of the squad.

"Ready, girls?" Carla said.

The girls started lining up, but I stayed where I was.

Carla looked over at me.

"Get in line, Diane!" she commanded. There was something scary about the way she was acting.

"Why don't we just cheer the regular cheers?" I said. "They're good."

"Get in line, I said!" Carla repeated.

Her eyes seemed to bore into me, and I found myself moving toward where the other cheerleaders were standing. It was like I couldn't help myself. Something was almost pulling me toward them.

I took my place between Jeanna and Betsy. I glanced at them, but their eyes were looking ahead. They were totally focused on Carla.

"Ready?" Carla shouted.

"Ready!" everyone else called back to her.

I couldn't get the words out of my mouth.

"We all have to be ready," Carla said. She was looking straight at me. "I'll ask you again. Ready?"

"Ready!" we repeated.

This time I joined in. It was like I had no control over what I was saying.

Carla took her stance.

We followed her lead.

"RAH! RAH! POW! POW!" we cheered. "THUNDER AND LIGHTNING STRIKE THEM NOW!"

All of a sudden, above us, there was a rumbling sound. I looked up. The sun was still shining, but black clouds had appeared out of nowhere and were hovering over the football field. A bolt of lighting flashed across the sky.

I looked back at Carla. She was looking directly at me. Now she had a smile on her face.

"Again!" Carla cried.

We took our stances again. "RAH! RAH! POW! POW! THUNDER AND LIGHTNING STRIKE THEM NOW!"

The thunder began to get louder. There were more and more streaks of lightning flashing above us.

On the field, the game was still going on. In fact, Carlson had just scored a second touchdown. It was now 14-0 in their favor.

I noticed some of the Carlson coaches looking up at the sky. At first, I thought they might cancel the game, but then I remembered that football games hardly ever got canceled for any reason. It would have to get really bad before they'd do that.

Our team had lined up to receive their kickoff.

"Come on, Tim!" Carla shouted. "You can do it!"

"Who's Tim?" I whispered to Mandy.

"Tim Wilson. Carla's boyfriend," Mandy said. "He's going to receive Carlson's kickoff this time."

"The coach should have put him in earlier," Carla said. "He's the best player on the team."

I doubted that, but I didn't say anything. Even I knew that the coaches usually played the best players.

Carlson kicked off. Tim caught the ball and started running up the field, but one of their big men was after him.

Suddenly, a streak of lightning flashed in front of their player and he stopped running. That allowed Tim to continue down the field toward Carlson's goal.

But another one of their players was running toward him.

"Tim's not going to make it!" I cried.

Then a second bolt of lightning came down from one of the black clouds and struck their player's feet. He fell to the ground.

Now there was no one to catch Tim. He scored.

"Come on, girls! Cheer!" Carla cried. "Tim made a touchdown!"

"We can't cheer! Their player was just struck by lightning!" I said. He was still on the ground. "He could be seriously hurt!"

The Carlson coaches had run out onto the field and were huddled around the player. They seemed to be talking to him. Suddenly, the player sat up, then he stood up, and the coaches started helping him off the field.

"See. There's nothing wrong with him," Carla said. She started jumping up and down, yelling, "We want another touchdown! We want another touchdown!"

The rest of the cheerleaders joined in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Novelist M.T. Coffin, whose "Spinetinglers" novels have sold more than one million copies, began his career writing obituaries as a freelancer for his local newspaper, *The Nightly Caller.* This was in addition to his full-time job in the Dead Letter Department of the post office. While he thoroughly enjoyed writing about the dead, M.T. Coffin abandoned that work to begin his first novel when a series of nightmares so amused and delighted him that he felt he must write them down to share with his friends and family. He wrote thirteen "Spinetinglers" before his wife, Berry A. Coffin, convinced him that the stories were interesting and exciting enough to share with others and helped him to submit his manuscripts to Avon Books for possible publication. The books were accepted immediately and the "Spinetinglers" series was born when the first novel, *The Substitute Creature,* was published in March 1995.

Gwen Montgomery, of the Young Readers Department at Avon Books, is delighted to be publishing M.T. Coffin and says, "My spine tingled on the very first page and I knew right then that

M.T. Coffin's books would keep readers dying for more."

M.T. Coffin was born on October 31 in Death Valley, California. The year is uncertain since, for some mysterious reason, all records of his birth except the date have disappeared, and no records of any family members have ever been discovered. Raised as an orphan, M.T. Coffin attended Death Valley High School. After graduation, he attended DeKay University where he studied literature. It was there that he was introduced to the works of authors who were to be among his lifelong favorites, including Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Mark Twain, and Edgar Allan Poe. It was also there that he met Berry during a blood drive on campus. Berry received a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education from DeKay and today is a substitute teacher and bee keeper.

Now, M.T. Coffin is writing full-time and has just completed *The Curse of the Cheerleaders.* Works in progress include *Wear and Scare, Lizard People,* and *Circus F.R.E.A.K.S.* He is currently traveling to research upcoming novels and has most recently visited Transylvania in Romania and Murderers Creek, Oregon. Other "Spine-tinglers" by M.T. Coffin include *Billy Baker's Dog Won't Stay Buried, My Teacher's a Bug, Where Have All the Parents Gone?, Check It Out—and Die!, Simon Says, "Croak!"* and *Snow Day.*

M.T. Coffin lives in Tombstone, Arizona, with Berry and their two children, Phillip A. Coffin

and Carrie A. Coffin, and their dog, Bones. He enjoys many hobbies, including reading, collecting books, taxidermy, playing the pipe organ, and bug collecting, an activity the entire family enjoys. The Coffins split their time between Arizona and their summer vacation home in Slaughter Beach, Delaware.

When asked about "Spinetinglers" and his many readers, M.T. Coffin responds, "I get goosebumps every time I think about how exciting it is to be able to tell stories all the time, and to reach so many people. I plan to keep writing forever."

PLAY AT YOUR OWN RISK!

Everybody knows The Creepy House where the old witch with wild eyes lives. Today the old lady is having a yard sale, and she insists that Michael buy a beat-up game she's selling.

Michael quickly discovers that he's bought a very strange game. The playing pieces are weird-looking metal insects—except for one, a carved figure of a boy. When it's Michael's turn to play, he's suddenly in a dark forest, running for his life. Something is chasing him, and a deadly spider and a scorpion are falling from the trees as he races from the sound of heavy breathing close behind him. He must be dreaming—sure enough, just as he plunges across a creek, Michael's back in his room... but he's not alone. A green bug with huge antennae is crawling on his shirt. His playing piece has mysteriously advanced three spaces and landed in the creek. Michael is terrified...and the game has just begun!

IF YOU DARE TO BE SCARED...
***READ ALL THE* SPINETINGLERS!**
by M.T. COFFIN

For your complete checklist of SPINETINGLERS
see inside front cover.

ISBN 0-380-78927-2
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008-01
RL 4.9
9 80380789276503922
01 2/2017 16:34-2
U.S.$3.99
CAN.$4.99